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Higher and Lower Pleasures and our Moral Psychology

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John Stuart Mill's treatise, *Utilitarianism*, takes the standard concept of utilitarianism, and tries to disentangle itself from the problems that plagued earlier utilitarian theories. One of the essential moves in order to do so is to distinguish between high and low pleasures. This distinction, for example, would not categorize an intellectual pleasure, such as reading poetry, to be similar in pleasure to a sensory pleasure, like eating a really good cupcake. By creating the divide between higher and lower pleasures, Mill assures us that the intellectual pursuit gives to a subject, not a higher *quantity* of pleasure, but a higher *quality*. These levels are not reducible to each other: eating a cupcake, no matter how intensely delicious it is, or how many you eat, will never be able to achieve the quality of reading poetry.

In breaking down Mill's reasons for this move, we may look at two sets of motivations for distinguishing higher and lower pleasures: one negative and one positive. The negative account shows what Mill was trying to resist: both to distinguish his utilitarianism from earlier utilitarian theories and so to avoid categorization in such a way which makes his theory susceptible to the general criticisms of utilitarian theories. The positive account shows what he gains from this distinction: in full, it turns out to be a quite advanced moral psychology, placed from the perspective of the individual.

The negative account of motivations illuminates the context for Mill's theory of utilitarianism. Mill constructed his theory as one of a series of utilitarian philosophers. He was the direct successor of Bentham, who was a huge influence for Mill (Crisp 20). But, as both chronological and ideological follower, Mill couldn't help but note the weaknesses and disadvantages of Bentham's utilitarianism. Bentham thought pleasures and pains could be measured according to their intensity and duration (Crisp 21). In other words, I can quantify my pleasures and pains, gauging from those two criteria. We can imagine some scenario in which we calculate the value of our lives depending upon the small or large, transitory or not, pleasures and pains that come our way. We

could use simple mathematics (coffee: +150 points; stubbing toe: -18 points; reading a really fabulous book: +13805 points), and come up with a sum. Quantifying pleasures and pains leads me to how to make my decisions. In order to make a decision that leads me to moral action, all I need to do is calculate the pleasure and pain of two routes. The best result would give me my course of action.

Despite the implied simplicity for decision-making (all you have to do is add and subtract pleasures and pains to figure out what is your best possible route), Bentham's utilitarianism seems like a naïve account. It's understandable to a certain extent that I would want to be able to assign a certain number of units to a pleasure or pain: it is possible, in evaluating, to say whether some event hurts or pleases you more or less. But life doesn't work like a video game: you don't count gold coins or save Princess Peach to gain points.

Mill, in his distinction of higher and lower pleasures, tries to correct for the naïveté of Bentham's simple hedonistic calculus. Intuitively, it seems like saying higher pleasures are nothing special would miss something important about human psychology and values. Thus, the first point is in place for the distinction of higher and lower pleasures: to move away from the limitations of Bentham's account.

Even more clearly, the stimulus for dividing higher and lower pleasures is the objection to utilitarianism directly referenced in *Utilitarianism*: the criticism which says that hedonists, in privileging pleasure, believe humans live a life no more worthy than that of swine. This criticism, referenced in the text as saying that hedonism is a "doctrine worthy only of swine" is from Carlyle's characterization of utilitarianism as "pig philosophy" (Crisp 23). Mill does privilege pleasure: he writes that happiness consists of pleasure and freedom from pain. As such, pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends (Mill 55). Like our pig cousins, we do act in assessment of pleasure and pain.

However, his hedonistic moral philosophy, though having good justification in light of Mill's entire account, can be easily misinterpreted: privileging pleasure and pain could lead us straight into everything we are warned against: gluttony, sloth, lust, anyone? If we leave the account as privileging pleasure (especially with privileging pleasure for the *individual*), all these would be justified to some extent. Separating higher and lower pleasures, as we shall see, allows Mill a reply to this criticism. Thus, making a distinction between higher and lower pleasures allows Mill to separate himself from earlier accounts of utilitarianism as well as replying to the criticisms leveled at utilitarianism in general.

For the positive account of reasons why Mill would choose to make the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, we must look to the text. In *Utilitarianism*, the original distinction between higher and lower pleasures is first presented as a reply to

the criticism of “pig philosophy”. There are lower, sensory pleasures, true; we share these pleasures with pigs and lower animals. But there *are also* higher pleasures: pleasures of the intellect, and of morality: these are distinctly human. This distinction is also, positively, necessary in order to develop a full account of Mill’s moral psychology.

Mill defines happiness as “intended pleasure, and the absence of pain” (Mill 55). This is a hedonistic theory. Every person desires his own happiness; but since everyone does desire his own happiness, the general happiness is desirable (Mill 81). The good life provides the maximum amount of happiness, but the test for how one should act is whatever creates the maximum amount of happiness for the most people. This is similar to Bentham’s account: but for Bentham, one looks at merely adding and subtracting units of pleasure and pain. For Mill, one must go beyond this, and have a more complex assessment of higher and lower pleasures.

So, the happiness of the good life is described as: “The happiness... was not a life of rapture, but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing.” (Mill 60). A hedonist believes welfare consists in pleasurable experiences; but as Roger Crisp points out, this leaves open the question of what makes pleasurable experiences good. In full hedonism, the sole reason that experiences are good is that they are pleasurable (Crisp 26). Mill’s division between high and low pleasures means that there are discontinuities in value between pleasures, so that no amount of lower pleasures can be more than some finite amount of higher pleasures (Crisp 30-31).

Rex Martin gives an explanation of this which does not mean that we should try to have as many high pleasures as possible, and once exhausted, move to lower pleasures. Rather, this privileging of higher pleasures over lower comes from looking at lives as a whole. A life of pleasure is mixed between mental and physical preferences, but it does give an order or priority between them (Martin 143). Our reason for assuming mental pleasures are better than physical is because this option is better than the alternative. This difference between lives is intrinsic (Martin 145-146).

What remains is that we are always to act in such a way that would increase the general happiness. Even if a person’s actions do increase happiness more than the alternative, for instance, increasing one’s own happiness without diminishing others’ happiness, like telling a lie we can guarantee no one will ever find out about, we may choose to act out of long-term prudence. As Mill puts it: “In the case of abstinences indeed—of things which people forbear to do, from moral considerations, though the consequences in the particular case might be beneficial—it would be unworthy of an intelligent agent not to be consciously aware that the action is of a class which, if practised generally,

would be generally injurious, and this is the ground of the obligation to abstain from it” (Mill 66).

Mill himself presents the claim that mental pleasures are better than physical to be because humans prefer to exist in a way that engages their higher faculties (Mill 56). We are *unwilling* to sink low due to our dignity as humans (Mill 57). We are not swine, to be satisfied with the pleasure of pigs (though what the pleasure of pigs might be is up for arguments as we learn more about ourselves and other species). We are human, and as such much account for our capacities and the pleasures which are attuned to these capacities.

Mill is an empiricist, and as such, he uses the competent judge as the test for comparing the pleasantness of experiences. “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” (Mill 56). His claim is, in essence, that humans prefer to exist in a way that engages their higher faculties. This is going beyond just the Greatest Happiness principle; it is appealing to a particular kind of moral psychology. The individual is still the arbiter of his own actions; Mill doesn’t advocate giving up lower pleasures for higher, and people shouldn’t be forced into such activities (Crisp 38). Nonetheless, the Greatest Happiness principle remains the end of human action and the standard of morality (Mill 59).

Mill is idealistic: he argues that we can eventually remedy all our problems and live good lives. It is perfectly possible for a person to reconcile their personal happiness and the greater happiness, according to Mill: “Genuine private affections, and a sincere interest in the public good, are possible, though in equal degrees, to every rightly brought up human being” (Mill 61). He suggests that all people with enough morality and intelligence can have an “enviable” life: the reasons they do not already are bad laws or subjugation to the will of others, or misfortunes of life (Mill 62). Mill is an optimist in this regard—he believes that with enough time and attention, all the calamities of life will be someday mitigated or resolved (Mill 62).

He suggests a social program to bring this about: 1) laws and social arrangements to make the interest of every individual in harmony with the whole, and 2) education and opinion should establish an association in each person’s mind between one’s own happiness and the greater good (Mill 64).

One possible objection to this ambitious social program, or even his account of how moral decisions are made, is that there isn’t time to weigh utility. His answer is that the human species learns the tendencies of actions over our long development (Mill 69-70). “The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the precepts of every practical art, admit of indefinite improvement, and, in a progressive state of human mind, their

improvement is perpetually going on” (Mill 70). Because humans evolve and develop, we will eventually be able to reconcile individual happiness with the general happiness.

The nexus of these two happinesses is from a moral psychology which comes surprisingly close to that of contemporary psychologists. Mill says that “Life would be a poor thing, very ill provided with sources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature, by which things originally indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures, both in permanency, in the space of human existence that they are capable of covering, and even in intensity” (Mill 83-84). Daniel Dennett gives a contemporary version of this argument: what is pleasurable, cute, sweet, or sexy, counterintuitively depends upon us. There is nothing necessarily cute about a baby; it is cute to us because we have developed in a way that causes us to care for babies, and thus continue the species (Dennett). We have developed such that our needs match the pleasure received.

The difference between high and lower pleasures in Mill’s account seems to fit intriguingly well with the way that contemporary psychologists think about emotions. For Mill, the pleasures of the intellect, of feelings and imagination, and of moral sentiments have much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. There are, however, circumstantial advantages to the former (Mill 56). Lower beings have more chances of being satisfied, but a higher being can live with the imperfections of the world and be better off (Mill 57).

Happiness is one criterion of morality, but Mill wishes to prove it is the only criterion. Virtue, for example, he says is only a component of happiness (Mill 82). In the end, he is trying to prove that human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is neither part of or as a means to happiness (Mill 84). In other words, he tries to focus our attention on human nature as developed enough so that we can use our responses as effective gauges for how we ought to act.

This connects to modern thought about moral psychology. Pleasure and pain can be considered in two ways—as the most basic emotions, after which more complex feelings develop in ways that are distinctly human; or as emotional building blocks for the more complex feelings. This question—whether our feelings are built separately from basic emotions (pleasure/pain) or built out of basic emotions, is a question of human development. But it can also shed light on how we must consider higher and lower pleasures—as interwoven, or as distinct?

Two psychologists who differ quite a lot on the subject are Antonio Damasio and Jaak Panksepp. For Damasio, emotion (pleasure/pain) is the most basic thing in the human brain. Feelings are later developments, depending upon the neocortex (a brain structure that we share only with the most developed primates) and are as such distinctly human.

For Panksepp, he believes that pain and pleasure are basic emotions from which all other emotions develop. As such, feelings are emotions (Baneke).

Both accounts, though contrasting, depend upon neurophysiology. There are three functional areas in the brain: the brainstem (“reptilian” brain) which controls survival behaviors and basic emotions such as pleasure and pain. Next developed is the midbrain (“paleomammalian” brain), which is accountable for our more developed emotions. Most sophisticated is the neocortex: the source of our intellect, language, rational thinking, and problem-solving (Baneke). The division given by modern psychologists of different emotions (‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures or pains, if you will) which corresponds to different parts of the brain lends credence to Mill’s division of higher and lower pleasures and pains.

Depending upon one’s conception of these two, we can receive a subtler account of how higher and lower pleasures are related, and what that could mean for human action. On the one hand, we could argue that our simplest desires are enmeshed within our higher desires, or that the two are completely stratified. Either account, however, would seem to suggest that Mill’s separation of the assessment of pleasure into higher and lower pleasures to be a valid argument, based upon the closest reading of our moral psychology. Further, it adds credibility to the assessment by the competent judge herself. As a member of the species, she is able to evaluate pleasure and action given the intricacies of her brain.

As an empiricist, Mill bases his ethics off of a study of human nature and psychology. He believes that we have as a base for all our actions, happiness, which consists of pleasure in both its higher and lower qualities. When appropriately realized, acting for happiness can lead us to moral good.

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