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**Mill's Perfectionism**  
**Notes & Quotes**

- Mill accepts the utilitarianism of his Radical forbears, but he modifies their conception of happiness in his doctrine of higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism* and elsewhere.
- Mill's conception of happiness is best understood as a form of perfectionism -- happiness consists in perfecting our nature as progressive beings.

### 1. THE HIGHER PLEASURES DOCTRINE

- Mill appears to endorse hedonistic utilitarianism in the Proportionality Doctrine.  
The creed which accepts as the foundations 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. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure [II 2].
- In response to the worry that happiness is fit only for swine (II 3), he defends the superiority of higher pleasures (e.g. poetry) to lower pleasures (e.g. push-pin).
- With apparent reference to Bentham, he claims that utilitarians can defend the extrinsic superiority of the higher pleasures.
- The traditional hedonist claims that pleasure is the one and only intrinsic good and that things are good insofar as they are pleasurable. Things other than pleasures can be good but only extrinsically insofar as they cause pleasure, and their value should be proportional to how pleasurable they are, which presumably depends on the duration, intensity, and number of pleasures.
- Presumably, Mill's view is that Bentham could and should have defended the extrinsic superiority of higher pleasures.
- Mill wants to put the superiority of higher pleasures on a more secure footing (II 4).
- In defending the intrinsic superiority of higher pleasures, Mill links them with the preferences of a competent judge.  
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. 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 [II 5].
- Mill claims that competent judges have a categorical preference for higher pleasures and that higher pleasures are not just intrinsically more valuable than lower ones but discontinuously so.

### 2. SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE PLEASURES

- *Subjective pleasures* are pleasurable mental states or sensations. Subjective pleasures may be distinguished by their phenomenal quality or feel, or they may be distinguished by their functional profile, for instance, as mental states or sensations that the subject likes and would, other things being equal, take steps to prolong.
- *Objective pleasures* are non-mental items, such as actions, activities, and pursuits that can and often do cause subjective pleasure. Cf. Hockey is my greatest pleasure.
- Are higher pleasures subjective or objective pleasures?

### 3. PROBLEMS FOR HEDONISM ABOUT HIGHER PLEASURES

- Suppose we understand higher pleasures as subjective pleasures.
- As Sidgwick notes, if higher pleasures are better than lower ones, but not because they are more pleasurable, how can the higher pleasures doctrine be squared with hedonism (*Outlines* 247)?
- Perhaps Mill's claim is that there are two factors affecting the magnitude of a pleasure: its quantity, as determined by its intensity and duration, and its quality or kind.
- But why should differences in the causes of pleasure affect the magnitude of pleasure produced?
- Also, how does this interpretation of the higher pleasures doctrine make sense of Mill's contrast between happiness and contentment or satisfaction? After explaining higher pleasures in terms of the categorical preferences of competent judges and insisting that competent judges would not trade any amount of lower pleasures for higher pleasures, he claims that this preference sacrifices contentment or satisfaction, but not happiness.

Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness -- that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior -- confounds two very different ideas, of happiness, and content. ... It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied [II 6].

Mill does not say that the preference of competent judges is for one kind of contentment over another or that Socrates has more contentment than the pig or fool by virtue of enjoying a different kind of contentment. Instead, he contrasts happiness and contentment and implies that Socrates is happier than the fool, even if less contented.

- Also, various features of Mill's discussion suggest that he is discussing objective, rather than subjective, pleasures.
  - For instance, in the second part of the proof of the principle of utility in Chapter IV Mill counts music, virtue, and health as pleasures (IV 5). These are objective pleasures.
  - Elsewhere in his discussion of higher pleasures in Chapter II, Mill equates a person's pleasures with his "indulgences" (II 7) and with his "mode of existence" (II 8). Here too he seems to be discussing lifestyles and pursuits, which would be objective pleasures.
  - Mill claims to be arguing that what the quantitative hedonist finds extrinsically more valuable is also intrinsically more valuable (II 4, 7). But what the quantitative hedonist defends as extrinsically more valuable are complex activities and pursuits, such as writing or reading poetry, not mental states. Because Mill claims that these very same things are intrinsically, and not just extrinsically, more valuable, his higher pleasures would appear to be intellectual activities and pursuits, rather than mental states.
  - In paragraphs 4-8 Mill links the preferences of competent judges and the greater value of the objects of their preferences. But among the things Mill thinks competent judges would prefer are activities and pursuits. And, in particular, in commenting on the passage quoted above (II 5), Mill writes
 

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the *manner of existence which employs their higher faculties* [II 6, emphasis added].
  - He also claims that happiness includes "many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive ..." (II 12). Whereas activities and pursuits can be passive or active, it is not clear if pleasures themselves could be passive or active.
- Insofar as Mill's higher pleasures doctrine concerns objective pleasures, it appears anti-hedonistic for two reasons.
  - First, he claims that the intellectual pursuits have value out of proportion to the amount of contentment or pleasure (the mental state) that they produce. This would contradict the hedonist claim that the extrinsic value of an activity is proportional to the amount of pleasure it produces.
  - Second, Mill claims that these activities are intrinsically more valuable than the lower pursuits (II 7). But the traditional hedonist claims that the mental state of pleasure is the one and only intrinsic good; activities can have only extrinsic value, and no activity can be intrinsically more valuable than another.
- Finally, consider T.H. Green's analysis of Mill's explanation of the fact that competent judges prefer activities that exercise their rational capacities by appeal to their sense of *dignity*.
 

We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness [on the part of a competent judge ever to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence] ... but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties ... [II 6].

Green thinks that the dignity passage undermines hedonism (*Prolegomena* §§164-66, 171). In claiming that it is the dignity of a life in which the higher capacities are exercised and the competent judge's sense of her own dignity that explains her preference for those activities, Mill implies that her preferences reflect judgments about the value that these activities have independently of their being the object of desire or the source of pleasure. We take pleasure in these activities because we recognize their value; they are not valuable because they are pleasurable. To see Green's point, think of competent judges as demi-gods. In the dignity passage, Mill is making the same sort of point that Socrates does in discussing Euthyphro's definition of piety as what all the gods love (*Euthyphro* 9c-11b). Socrates thought the gods' attitudes would be principled, not arbitrary. But this means that their love presupposes, rather than explains, piety and justice. Similarly, Mill thinks that the preferences of competent judges are not arbitrary, but principled, reflecting a sense of the value of the higher capacities. On this reading, the preference of competent judges for higher activities is evidential, rather than constitutive, of the superior value of those activities

#### 4. PERFECTIONISM

- We can begin to see the possibility of reading Mill as a kind of perfectionist about happiness who claims that happiness consists in a kind of self-realization involving the proper exercise of those capacities essential to our nature.

- For instance, early in *On Liberty* he describes the utilitarian foundation of his defense of individual liberties but insists that “it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being” (I 11).
- Mill apparently believes that the sense of dignity of a (properly self-conscious) progressive being would give rise to a categorical preference for activities that exercise his or her higher capacities. In claiming that “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (U II 6), Mill recognizes capacities for self-examination and practical deliberation as among our higher capacities.
- This concern is, of course, a central theme in *On Liberty*.

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold his deliberate decision. And these qualities he requires and exercises exactly in proportion as the part of his conduct which he determines according to his own judgment and feelings is a large one. It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm’s way, without any of these things. But what will be his comparative worth as a human being [III 4]?

Here Mill contrasts human and merely animal (ape-like) nature and identifies capacities for practical deliberation with human nature.

- But Mill does not think that all humans possess these capacities. Early in *On Liberty* he places limits on the scope of his liberal principles, telling us that they do not apply to individuals that do not possess a suitably developed normative competence.

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage. ... Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. ... [A]s soon as mankind have attained the capacity of being guided to their own improvement by conviction or persuasion (a period long since reached in all nations with whom we need here concern ourselves), compulsion, either in the direct form or in that of pains and penalties for noncompliance, is no longer admissible as a means to their own good, and justifiable only for the security of others [I 10; cf. *PPE* V.xi.9].

Here Mill recognizes that children have immature deliberative faculties and that some adults have very limited normative competence, whether due to congenital defects or social circumstance. So the normative competence Mill values is imperfectly correlated with humanity, understood as a biological category. Instead, he invokes humanity as a *normative category*, one that can be linked to the normative concept of a *person*. This is what underlies his talk about humanity as a “progressive” force and the “comparative worth of a human being.”

- Persons are moral agents, who can be responsible and accountable for their actions. Mill discusses responsibility in *A System of Logic* in the section entitled “Of Liberty and Necessity” (VI.ii.3). There he claims that capacities for practical deliberation are necessary for responsibility. In particular, he claims that moral responsibility involves a kind of self-mastery or self-governance in which one can distinguish between the *strength* of one’s desires and impulses and their *suitability* or *authority* and in which one’s actions can reflect one’s deliberations about what is suitable or right to do. Responsible agents must be able to deliberate about the appropriateness of their desires and regulate their actions according to these deliberations. This kind of normative competence is essential to our humanity, conceived of as a normative category.
- So Mill can claim that possession and use of our deliberative capacities mark us as progressive beings, because they are what mark us as moral agents who are responsible. If our happiness should reflect the sort of beings we are, then higher activities that exercise these deliberative capacities form the principal or most important ingredient in human happiness. This is a perfectionist claim about happiness.

## 5. RECONCILING THE ELEMENTS

- The problem is that Mill appears to endorse three distinct conceptions of happiness.
  1. Hedonism
  2. Informed Preference Satisfaction
  3. Perfectionism

Can we reconcile these elements?

- The perfectionist reconciliation says that happiness consists in the exercise of higher capacities; that the preferences of competence judges are evidential, rather than constitutive, of superior value; and that higher pleasures are objective pleasures.

## 6. PERFECTIONISM ABOUT HAPPINESS

- One can be a perfectionist about the good, but can one be a perfectionist about happiness? Isn't happiness essentially subjective?
- We have to distinguish two common assumptions about happiness.
  1. Happiness is subjective.
  2. Happiness matters.

Happiness is subjective iff it consists in or depends on the subject's psychological states.

Happiness matters iff the following claims hold.

1. A good life is the life that is good in itself for the one who lives it.
  2. A life is good in itself iff it is the sort of life that one would want for someone insofar as one cared about her for her own sake (cf. Feldman's crib test).
  3. What one wants for someone for whom one cares for her own sake is her happiness.
- The problem is that these two assumptions about happiness are in tension. Subjective conceptions of happiness should lead us to doubt that happiness is what matters (cf. the contented pig, Nozick's experience machine, the Deluded Schoolboy, and worries about the value of shallow and undemanding lives).
  - We could treat the idea that happiness is subjective as fixed point and conclude so much the worse for happiness, replacing the utilitarian appeal to happiness with a more objective concept, such as well-being or the personal good.
  - Alternatively, we could hold fixed the idea that happiness is what matters and reject the assumption that happiness must be subjective. Here, we would distinguish between apparent and genuine happiness; whereas apparent happiness may be subjective, true happiness is not. This is the route the perfectionist about happiness should take.

## 7. PERFECTIONISM AND PLURALISM

- Subjective conceptions imply *pluralism about the good*, which many find attractive.
- Must perfectionist conceptions of happiness deny pluralism about the good?
- Perfectionist conceptions of the good can embrace some forms of pluralism insofar as rational or deliberative capacities can be realized in very different kinds of lives (e.g. the artisan, as well as the intellectual).
- In fact, subjective conceptions must be *content-neutral* and not just pluralist. But our doubts about the value of shallow and undemanding lifestyles show that we do not embrace content-neutrality.
- Only objective conceptions, such as perfectionism, promise to deliver pluralism without content-neutrality.

## 8. UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT PERFECTIONISM

- *Purity*. Does perfectionism provide a complete specification of the personal good?
- One concern about purity is whether happiness requires subjective pleasure in addition to the objective pleasures of perfection?
  - It seems plausible that a life is improved if a person takes subjective pleasure in her objectively valuable pursuits. Even if it's better to be an artisan than a lint collector, it's better to be a subjectively happy artisan than a miserable artisan.
  - Even if this required a mixed conception of happiness, it could still be a form of *predominant perfectionism*.
  - Moreover, it's possible to understand these sort of subjective pleasures as the *appreciation* of perfectionist value. If so, this kind of subjective pleasure is arguably a perfectionist value. This would vindicate pure perfectionism
- Another concern about purity is that deliberative ideals may need to be supplemented with a list objective values.
  - The *radical critique* is that deliberative values are empty unless there are goods to weigh in the deliberative scale; whereas the *moderate critique* is that deliberative values are genuine but do not exhaust the objective goods that a person should recognize.
  - We can dismiss the radical critique, because content is a function of what is ruled out, and the deliberative ideal rules out shallow and undemanding lives. It may be pluralistic, but it is not content-neutral.
  - The moderate critique needs to be taken seriously and assessed on a case-by-case basis by determining if there are genuine personal goods that can't be brought under the perfectionist umbrella. It's hard to know since many plausible goods, such as knowledge, achievement, and friendship can arguably be given perfectionist analysis.
  - Even if some genuine goods defy perfectionist analysis, this is consistent with predominant perfectionism.