

PHIL 202: Ethics Core Course
Winter 2005; David O. Brink
Topic: Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy
Handout #2: Hedonism, Happiness, and the Higher Pleasures Doctrine

PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM AND HEDONISM

- Psychological Egoism.
 - The only thing anyone desires for its own sake is her own happiness. Alternately, a person's own happiness is her only ultimate object of desire.
 - Everyone acts with the ultimate aim of promoting (maximizing) her own real or perceived happiness or self-interest.
- Psychological Hedonism.
 - The only thing anyone desires for its own sake is her own pleasure. Alternately, a person's own pleasure is her only ultimate object of desire.
 - Everyone acts with the ultimate aim of promoting (maximizing) her own real or perceived pleasure.
- Pleasure.
 - The **Simple Quality** View: Pleasure is a simple, qualitative mental state or sensation – a state with a certain feel -- that varies intrinsically only along the dimensions of intensity and duration. Similarly pain is a (different) simple, qualitative mental state or sensation that varies in intensity and duration.
 - The **Functional** View: Pleasure is a mental state or sensation the having of which one wants to continue and will, ceteris paribus, take steps to prolong. Pain is a mental state or sensation that one wants to discontinue and will, ceteris paribus, take steps to make cease.

Though Bentham and James Mill endorsed psychological egoism and hedonism, one might wonder whether their main philosophical purposes depended on it. For example, their argument that democratic institutions allow us to harness the self-interest of rulers to secure the interest of the governed would appear to work equally well on the far weaker assumption that altruism is limited in scope and/or weight (cf. Bentham, Book of Fallacies 392-93

What was John Stuart Mill's attitude toward psychological egoism and hedonism? Some later moral philosophers, such as Henry Sidgwick, have read Mill as a psychological egoist (Methods 42-44). This is not just guilt by association. For it may appear that Mill endorses psychological egoism in his so-called "proof" of the principle of utility in Utilitarianism ch. iv. Mill aims to show that happiness is the one and only thing desirable in itself (iv 2). To do this, he argues that happiness is desirable in itself (iv 3), and a central premise in this argument is that everyone desires his own happiness (iv 3). Mill later argues that only happiness is desirable (iv 4). A traditional reconstruction might look something like this.

1. Utilitarianism is true iff happiness is the one and only thing desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
2. The only proof of desirability is desire.
3. Each person desires his own happiness for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).

4. Hence, happiness, as such, is desired for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else) from the point of view of humanity.
5. Hence, happiness, as such, is desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
6. Happiness is the only thing desired for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else). Other things – such as virtue, health, music, money, and power – can come to be desired for their own sakes, but then they are desired as parts of happiness.
7. Hence, happiness is the only thing desirable for its own sake (and not for the sake of something else).
8. Hence, utilitarianism is true.

There are various worries about the adequacy of the proof, so construed, to which we will later return. The important point, for present purposes, is that Mill does not endorse psychological egoism here. (3) does say that each person has an ultimate desire for her own happiness, but he does not say that this is each person's only ultimate desire. Indeed, in the second half of the proof he allows that some agents have a disinterested concern for virtue and that they care about virtue for its own sake (iv 4-5). And what is true of virtue is no less true of less grand objects of desire, such as money or power (iv 6). These too it is possible to desire for their own sakes. In fact, Mill offers an associationist story about the evolution of such intrinsic or ultimate desires.

If we look outside of Utilitarianism we can find even clearer evidence of Mill's doubts about psychological egoism and hedonism. In a note to his edition of James Mill's Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind John Stuart Mill diagnoses a possible equivocation in his father's doctrine.

That the pleasures or pains of another person can only be pleasurable or painful to us through the association of our own pleasures and pains with them, is true in one sense, which is probably that intended by the author, but not true in another, against which he has not sufficiently guarded his mode of expression. It is evident, that the only pleasures or pains of which we have direct experience ... [are] those felt by ourselves ... [and] that the pleasure or pain with which we contemplate the pleasure or pain felt by someone else, is itself a pleasure or pain of our own. But if it be meant that in such cases the pleasure or pain is consciously referred to self, I take this to be a mistake [ii 217-18].

In his "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy" Mill urges a similar caution in understanding Bentham.

In laying down as a philosophical axiom that men's actions are always obedient to their interests, Mr. Bentham did no more than dress up the very trivial proposition that all people do what they feel themselves most disposed to do He by no means intended by this assertion to impute universal selfishness to mankind, for he reckoned the motive of sympathy as an interest [The Classical Utilitarians, pp. 264-65].

In both passages Mill makes what is now a familiar diagnosis of the troubles with psychological egoism. Mill thinks that psychological egoism is ambiguous between a true but trivial thesis about the ownership of desire -- an agent necessarily acts on his own desires -- and a substantive but wildly implausible thesis about the content of desires -- an agent's ultimate desire is always and necessarily to promote his own interests or pleasure. If so, there is no thesis that is both substantive and plausible. It seems clear from Bentham's and James Mill's worries about the conflict between ruler's interests and the interest of the ruled that they intend the substantive psychological thesis. But if they do so because they conflate it with the trivial but true thesis, then they commit the fallacy of equivocation.

In A System of Logic Mill again provides a critique of psychological hedonism that relies on an associationist account of the development of plural ends that are psychologically autonomous.

When the will is said to be determined by motives, a motive does not mean always, or solely, the anticipation of a pleasure or of a pain. I shall not here inquire whether it be true that, in the commencement, all our voluntary actions are mere means consciously employed to obtain some pleasure, or to avoid some pain. It is at least certain that we gradually, through the influence of association, come to desire the means without thinking of the end: the action itself becomes an object of desire, and is performed without reference to any motive beyond itself. Thus far, it may be objected, that, the action having through association become pleasurable, we are, as much as before, moved to act by the anticipation of a pleasure, namely, the pleasure of the action itself. But granting this, the matter does not end here. As we proceed in the formation of habits, and become accustomed to will a particular act or a particular course of conduct because it is pleasurable, we at last continue to will it without any reference to its being pleasurable. Although, from some change in us or in our circumstances, we have ceased to find any pleasure in the action, or perhaps to anticipate any pleasure as the consequence of it, we will still continue to desire the action and consequently to do it. In this manner it is that habits of hurtful excess continue to be practiced although they have ceased to be pleasurable; and in this manner also it is that the habit of willing to persevere in the course which he has chosen, does not desert the moral hero, even when the reward, however real, which he doubtless receives from the consciousness of well-doing, is anything but an equivalent for the sufferings he undergoes, or the wishes which he may have to renounce [VI.ii.4].

Something one desires originally only as an instrumental means to pleasure comes, by a process of association, to be desired for itself. In the process, Mill claims, the desire acquires psychological autonomy such that it can conflict with the prudential or hedonist concerns from which it originated.

He does explicitly raise the etiological question about whether our desires might have originated in desires for one's own pleasure, but he is also explicitly agnostic about correct answer to this question. This etiological psychological thesis is interesting. Mill suggests the etiological thesis that all actions are based on desires that originated as desires for the agent's own benefit or pleasure. But this etiological thesis is surely too strong. Once I form psychologically autonomous desires for things other than my own benefit or pleasure, I can form other desires as means of satisfying these ultimate desires that are not for my own benefit or pleasure. If so, some desires need never have originated in a desire for my own benefit or pleasure.

A weaker etiological thesis would simply claim that our desires were all built up originally out of desires for benefit or pleasure. So it would in effect be a claim of developmental psychology about a child's original stock of desires and would have implications for the structure of early learning. Even this weak etiological thesis should be controversial. For instance, it's not clear that children don't just have innate desires for things like love, approval, and security. Of course, it will please them to be loved, approved, and secure. But – in line with the famous criticism of psychological egoism by Bishop Butler (1692-1752) – this pleasure appears to be consequential on a prior and independent ultimate desire for these objects.

That all particular appetites and passions are toward external things themselves, distinct from the pleasure arising from them, is manifested from hence -- that there could not be this pleasure were it not for that prior suitability between the object and the passion; there could be no enjoyment or delight from one thing more than another, from eating food more than swallowing a stone, if there were not an affection or appetite to one thing more than another [Sermons xi 6].

Butler's point shows that it is a fallacy to suppose that we aim at the pleasure that we expect to accompany the satisfaction of our desires. The pleasure in getting x (P1) is predicated on the prior desire for x (D1); the desire is not predicated on that pleasure. Even if the anticipation of P1 produces a new desire for x (D2), this gives no reason to think that the original desire for x (D1) is predicated on the expectation of pleasure.

Mill rejects the traditional substantive doctrines of psychological egoism and hedonism that Bentham and his father defended. This is really part of a larger criticism of the conception of psychology and human nature underlying Benthamite utilitarianism, which elaborates in his essays "On Bentham" and "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy". Mill links Bentham's faults to the narrowness of his philosophy and personality.

Bentham's contempt, then, for all other schools of thinkers; his determination to create a philosophy wholly out of the materials furnished by his own mind, and by minds like his own; was his first disqualification as a philosopher. His second, was the incompleteness of his own mind as a representative of universal human nature. In many of the most natural and strongest feelings of human nature he had no sympathy; from many of its graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and the faculty by which one mind understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination [CW /61].

This narrowness of vision accounted for both the strengths and weaknesses of Bentham's philosophical system.

This, then, is our idea of Bentham. He was a man both of remarkable endowments for philosophy, and of remarkable deficiencies for it: fitted, beyond almost any man, for drawing from his premises, conclusions not only correct, but sufficiently precise and specific to be practical: but whose general conception of human nature and life, furnished him with an unusually slender stock of premises [CW /63].

Mill's desire to distance himself from Benthamite assumptions about human nature and psychology are also reflected in his conception of happiness and his doctrine of higher pleasures.

MILL'S CONCEPTION OF HAPPINESS

Mill explains his commitment to utilitarianism early in Chapter ii of Utilitarianism.

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; cf. ii 1].

This sounds like Bentham. The first sentence appears to endorse act utilitarianism, while the second sentence appears to endorse a hedonistic conception of act utilitarianism.

But Mill immediately goes on to introduce his doctrine of higher pleasures, which he contrasts with Benthamite utilitarianism and which threatens to undermine his apparent commitment to hedonism. Mill worries that some will reject hedonism as a theory of value or

happiness fit only for swine (ii 3). In particular, he worries that opponents will assume that utilitarianism favors sensual or voluptuary pursuits (e.g. push-pin) over higher or nobler pursuits (e.g. poetry).

Mill begins by noting, with fairly obvious reference to Bentham, that the hedonist can defend higher pursuits as extrinsically superior on the ground that they produce more intense, durable, and fecund pleasures (ii 4). In fact, Bentham appears to have thought not simply that push-pin could be as valuable as poetry but that in fact it was more valuable. In The Rationale of Reward Bentham writes

The utility of all these arts and sciences ... is exactly in proportion to the pleasure they yield. Every other species of preeminence which may be attempted to be established among them is altogether fanciful. Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play at push-pin; poetry and music are relished only by a few. The game of push-pin is always innocent: it were well could the same always be asserted of poetry. Indeed, between poetry and truth there is a natural opposition: false morals and fictitious nature. ... If poetry and music deserve to be preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased [III.i]

Here Bentham sketches a case for the purity and extent of the pleasures of push-pin.

Presumably, Mill's claim is that the Benthamite hedonist could and should defend the extrinsic superiority of higher pleasure. Nonetheless, Mill is not content with this defense of the superiority of higher pleasures; he insists that the greater value of intellectual pleasures can and should be put on a more secure footing (ii 4). He explains these higher pleasures and links them with the preferences of a competent judge, in the following manner.

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].

This certainly goes beyond Bentham's quantitative hedonism. It is unclear whether the higher pleasures doctrine is consistent with hedonism. Mill sometimes uses the term 'pleasure' to refer to

(a) a certain kind of mental state or sensation

and sometimes to refer to

(b) non-mental items, such as actions, activities, and pursuits that do or can cause pleasurable mental states (cf. the way in which someone might refer to sexual activity as a bodily pleasure).

Call (a)-type pleasures subjective pleasures and (b)-type pleasures objective pleasures. What's unclear is whether Mill's higher pleasures are subjective pleasures or objective pleasures.

One might interpret the higher pleasures to refer to objective pleasures.

- 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).

- Elsewhere in his discussion of higher pleasures Mill equates a person's pleasures with his "indulgences" (ii 7) and with his "mode of existence" (ii 8).
- When Mill introduces higher pleasures (ii 4) he is clearly discussing, among other things, intellectual pursuits and activities. He 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 (intellectual) activities and pursuits, 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].
- Mill claims that happiness includes "many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive ..." (ii 12).

Insofar as Mill's higher pleasures doctrine concerns objective pleasures, it is 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 in actual folks or competent judges. This contradicts the hedonist claim that the extrinsic value of an activity is proportional to the quantity of pleasure associated with it. Second, Mill claims that these activities are intrinsically more valuable than the lower pursuits (ii 7). But the hedonist must claim 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.

What if Mill is concerned with subjective pleasures only? Let us suppose that Mill is focusing on pleasurable sensations and then distinguishing higher and lower pleasures by references to their causes. Higher pleasures are pleasures caused by the exercise of our higher faculties, whereas lower pleasures are pleasures caused by the exercise of our lower capacities. But conceding this difference among pleasures does not imply the qualitative superiority of the former. One might think that a hedonist should claim that pleasures, as such, should be of equal value, though some activities that produce pleasure may produce more intense or more durable pleasures. But Mill may think that it is the categorical preferences of competent judges that explain what makes one kind of pleasure more valuable as another. This presumably would fit with a functional state conception of pleasure.

An early critic of Mill's higher pleasures doctrine is the British idealist T.H. Green (1836-82) in his Prolegomena to Ethics (1883). Green focuses on Mill's explanation of the preferences of competent judges for modes of existence that employ their higher faculties.

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 they are valuable; they are not valuable, because they are pleasurable. This means that the preferences of competent judges should be understood as evidence of the greater value of the object of their preferences, rather than as constituting the object of their preferences as more valuable.

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 (9c-11b). Socrates thought the gods' attitudes would be principled, not arbitrary. But this meant that their love presupposed, rather than explained, 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.

HAPPINESS AND THE PROOF OF UTILITY

Still more evidence that Mill is not a hedonist, at least not a consistent hedonist, is contained in his proof of the principle of utility in Chapter iv. Part of Mill's claim then is that happiness is the only thing desirable in itself, which he defends by arguing that apparent counterexamples are not inconsistent with his claim. He says that we can various things -- such as virtue, health, or music -- for their own sakes compatibly with happiness being the only ultimate object of desire provided that we desire these other things as parts of happiness (iv 4-5).

But whereas Mill might be able to reconcile the intrinsic value and pursuit of virtue with the ultimate value and pursuit of happiness, it seems he cannot reconcile the intrinsic value and pursuit of virtue with the ultimate value and pursuit of pleasure. Virtue might be part of a perfectionist conception of happiness as a complex whole that consists of the proper exercise of various essential or important human capacities. But virtue cannot be a proper part of a hedonist conception of happiness. Mill's claim that there are a plurality of intrinsic goods, including virtue, is incompatible with the hedonist claim that pleasure is the one and only intrinsic good.

MORE PERFECTIONISM

In On Liberty Mill claims that his defense of liberty relies on claims about the happiness of people as progressive beings.

It is proper to state that I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being [i 11].

Mill thinks that it is our deliberative capacities, especially our capacities for practical deliberation, that mark us as progressive creatures and that, as a result, the principal ingredient of our happiness or well-being must exercise these deliberative capacities.

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]?

Even if we agree that these deliberative capacities are unique to humans or that humans possess them to a higher degree than other creatures, we might wonder in what way their possession marks us as progressive beings or their exercise is important to human happiness. Though he is not as clear about this as one might like, his discussion of responsibility in A System of Logic ("Of Liberty and Necessity") suggests that he thinks that humans are responsible agents and that this is what marks us as progressive beings.

A person who feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist ... [VI.ii.3]

Here Mill 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 their suitability or authority and in which one's actions reflect one's deliberations about what is suitable or right to do. If so, Mill can claim that possession and use of our deliberative capacities mark us as progressive beings and constitute the principal ingredient in human happiness.

CONSISTENCY IN MILL'S CONCEPTION OF HAPPINESS

The perfectionist elements in Mill's conception of happiness are hard to square with hedonism. If so, the way to avoid inconsistency would be to avoid Mill's apparent hedonism. The apparently hedonistic formulation at the beginning of Utilitarianism ch. ii (para. 2), Mill insists, is only a first approximation that needs articulation. For that passage continues as follows.

To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure, and to what extent this is left an open question [ii 2].

He makes a related claim when he says that "the ingredients of happiness are very various" (iv 5). This claim is puzzling if hedonism is true; it is not if Mill has an objective (e.g. perfectionist) view about happiness (according to which the Deluded Schoolboy is not really happy). We can read Mill as embracing an objective view of happiness by reading the higher pleasures as objective pleasures.