

Blackboard Notes on Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chapter 2 opening
Mill on the good. For Philosophy 13

After stating the utilitarian principle (the righter/wronger test), Mill says many think that the idea that life has “no better object of desire and pursuit” than pleasure is “a doctrine worthy only of swine.” In other words, the objection is that pleasure is not the only good. Nor is it the highest good. There are other things people reasonably care about.

Bentham: “Quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin [a simple children’s game like spin-the-bottle] is as good as poetry.” The critic of utilitarianism says this is wrong.

Mill could uphold some activities as better than others on instrumental grounds. The pleasures of working on engineering projects get bridges built and thus contribute to people’s happiness. The pleasures of drinking excessively yield benefits only for the drinker and may produce the pain of a hangover later for him. Mill agrees, but wants to argue that some pleasures are intrinsically better than others—better independently of any further consequences they might cause, good or bad.

Mill makes a flurry of moves. The main one is to distinguish quantity and quality of pleasure. If the pleasure of reading poetry is qualitatively superior to the pleasure of eating candy, then an hour of eating candy might yield a greater amount of pleasure than an hour of poetry reading yet still be less valuable than the latter. Superior quality amplifies the intrinsic value of a given quantity of one or another pleasure.

The pleasure of drinking fine beer might be qualitatively superior to the pleasure of drinking cheap beer. But Mill supposes that for the most part, the higher quality pleasures are complex mental pleasures and the lower quality pleasures are those we share with pigs and other animals (eating, drinking, smelling, defecating, fornicating).

How do we measure quantity of pleasure? Mill does not say. Maybe the unit is quantity of time experiencing a homogeneous sensation—the pleasure of eating a peach for one minute, when the sensation feels the same throughout the time period. Call that one unit, and measure the quantity of other types of pleasure relative to that. If gulping soda when you are hot and thirsty for one minute is twice as pleasurable as standard peach-eating, then that soda gulping yields two units. Another approach would be via direct measurement of brain states, if we had the technology to do that. In principle there is a fact of the matter here—a person who is having an intensely pleasurable experience has something different going on in his brain than goes on when he has a mildly pleasurable experience. This difference should be detectable by measurement—observation informed by a developed brain science.

Mill entertains the possibility that quality could entirely trump quantity. “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” Socrates (the wise person) is said to prefer a life with just a tiny amount of philosophical contemplation pleasure than a life of any length filled with simple pleasures such as the pleasure a dog gets from scratching its itch.

The test of quality of pleasure is the preference of the informed experts. “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.” The experts deciding which pleasure is qualitatively superior must have experienced both and must be capable of appreciating both. Mill does not say whether expert preference is evidence for qualitative superiority or instead expert preference makes it the case that one pleasure is qualitatively superior to another.

Mill considers the objection: Some experience the “higher” (complex mental) pleasures and the “lower” (simple bodily) pleasures and then opt for the latter. They read poetry at Oxford and then devote their lives to gin drinking. Mill: by the time one prefers the lower pleasure one has already lost the capacity for the higher. Reply: it might be that becoming fit to experience one type of pleasure makes one unfit to experience other types, so the test for superior pleasure might usually be indeterminate. Anyway one could accept Mill’s doctrine and let the test results be as they may. If pig pleasures are preferred by the qualified experts, so be it.

Further objection: The test for expert preference does not seem to be a test of quality of pleasure at all. Someone might prefer the pleasure of working at physics to the pleasure of lying on the beach while recognizing the beach-lying is superior as a pleasure. One might prefer doing physics because one thinks it is intrinsically a more worthy, noble activity. “I prefer the pleasure of physics to the pleasures of the beach even though the pleasures of the beach are superior as pleasures.” This sounds coherent. If so, Mill’s test is not properly constructed.

Further objection: Someone might reasonably hold that some things are worth striving for, enhance the life of the person who gets those things, even though they do not involve experience at all, pleasurable or otherwise. Someone may aim to do good work, or write a good novel, or be a loyal friend, or be faithful in love, or achieve athletic excellence. Mill has to claim all these things are intrinsically worthless, and are worth striving for only insofar as they produce pleasurable experiences for self and others. This seems dogmatic. (See the “experience machine” handout.)

Another worry: Suppose you accept Mill’s claim that pleasures differ in quality and that the criterion of superior quality is informed preference. There is something weird about Mill’s claim that the preferences of other people determine the quality of your pleasures. Suppose you are acquainted with two types of pleasure and capable of appreciating both. Let’s say your informed preference is that eating coffee fudge ice cream is qualitatively superior to eating vanilla ice cream, or that rock climbing is qualitatively superior to listening to symphony recordings. What does it signify that other people, the informed experts, have different preferences? Their tastes may be just different from yours. Given Mill’s general position here, I don’t really see why he does not say that the quality of one pleasure versus another for an individual is determined by that very individual’s informed competent preference between them.

Anyway, does it make sense to distinguish quality and quantity of pleasures as Mill does? No doubt the kinds of experience that are pleasurable differ enormously in quality. The experiences of engaging in hard athletic activity, lying on the beach, listening to music at a concert, talking with friends in a cafe, and so on feel qualitatively very different to the person having one or another of these experiences. But insofar as there is a pleasurable or enjoyable aspect of these very different experiences, is there conceptual room for this aspect of experience to differ except as more or less? The question arises here, what is a pleasure. Mill does not say. There are roughly two views. On one view, pleasure is liked or desired experience. The more one desires an experience, the more pleasurable it is. On the other view, pleasure is a distinct sensation. When one enjoys something, it feels a certain way, different from what the feeling would be if there were no pleasure/enjoyment in it. In principle, on the second view, somebody could have weird desires, or be crazy, or snobbish, and prefer painful experiences to pleasant ones. (I don’t mean the person is masochistic, and gets pleasure from experiencing pain, in a mix with pleasure predominating. I mean the person oddly prefers what is less pleasant. For example, maybe if I am snobbish, I prefer the experience of polo playing to the experience of playing pool, even though the second experience has the feeling of being more pleasurable. On the first account of what pleasure is, this makes no sense; on the second view, it does, it’s a coherent possibility.) Back to the initial question: on one or the other view of what a pleasure is, does it make sense to hold that pleasure itself (as opposed to other aspects of the experiences that are pleasurable) can vary except on the single dimension of quantity?

Even if Mill is right that happiness and happiness alone is good and happiness just is pleasure (modified by quality) and the absence of pain, his discussion is inadequate to show this. He doesn’t consider the full range of possible views about what makes a life intrinsically better or worse for the person who is living it. (Something makes your life go intrinsically better for you if it improves your life in and of itself, independently of any further good or bad consequences it might produce for you.) These views are theories of human good.

Nozick’s experience machine example might suggest that an individual’s life goes better for her, the more her basic desires, weighted by their felt importance to her, are satisfied over the course of her life. This is the desire satisfaction view. A desire for something is basic just in case you desire that thing for its own sake not as a means to some further goal. On this view, events in a person’s life can be intrinsically good for her even though they are not experienced with pleasure and even if they are not experienced at all. If you desire above all to be loved and respected by your family, friends, and colleagues, and they privately despise you but behave nicely to you, your life goes badly even though you never learn of their disdain and your experience is as though they loved and respected you. Opposed to the desire satisfaction view is the view that nothing matters, so far as the goodness of an individual’s life is concerned, except the character of the individual’s experiences—how life feels from the inside, as one lives it. One version of such a view is hedonism—the good for a person is pleasure and the absence of pain.

The desire satisfaction view is vulnerable to the objection that people sometimes want things on the basis of cognitive error. They desire X for its own sake, but would not desire X if they were not making some mistake. Suppose my wife’s one big life aim is to erect a monument in our back yard to her husband’s virtue. This is her only important desire. She labors for years and succeeds in building a big ugly statue to my virtue. Is her life successful? Suppose it is also the case that she would not have formed and sustained this

desire if she did not believe that her husband was extraordinarily virtuous, but in fact this belief was incorrect. My virtue level is far below average, subpar for humans. According to the desire satisfaction view, my wife in this story led a life that was very good for her. This seems wrong.

The informed desire satisfaction theory identifies the good for a person with the satisfaction of the desires she would have if she were fully informed of relevant facts and making no cognitive errors (e.g., adding 2 plus 2 and getting the answer 5). *Relevant facts* are the ones learning which would cause your desires to change. A slight variant: the good for a person is the satisfaction of her actual desires to the degree they would withstand becoming fully informed of relevant facts while making no cognitive errors.

Suppose that I now desire to learn quantum physics, but if I were fully informed, I would already know quantum physics, hence would have no desire to learn it. This hardly seems to discredit my present actual desire. This problem has led some to reformulate the informed desire satisfaction theory as the ideal advisor theory: a person's life goes better for you, the more over the course of your life you satisfy the desires that an ideally informed and straight-thinking advisor (you, as you would be if improved in these ways) would want actual you to have, on the assumption the ideal advisor is favorably disposed toward actual you. This may be the best version of the desire satisfaction family of theories.

Objections: (1) Your desires intuitively may not pertain to your good. Your important desires may include the desire that some good cause triumph or that distant strangers should have good lives. Here the satisfaction of your desires does not seem to make your life go intrinsically better. But if we say, your life goes better, the more those of your desires are satisfied that concern your own good, our account looks to be viciously circular—we have to know in advance what's good for a person before we can apply the test that is supposed to fix what is good for that person. (2) A person's desires may concern her own life but be self-punishing or self-hating. Suppose I believe I deserve suffering for my sins, so my biggest desire is that my life go badly. If this desire is satisfied, and my life goes badly, then my life is going well according to the desire satisfaction theory. This does not make sense. (3) A person's desires, even idealized according to some full information account, may be weird, and intuitively their satisfaction does not contribute to the person's good. Consider the ideally informed anorexic: her one big desire is to maintain her thin body ideal, even though she knows doing this will mean death by starvation at a very young age. (4) The versions of the desire satisfaction view that identify what is good for me with what some idealized version of me would desire may induce an alienation problem. A version of me that became ideally informed might undergo all sorts of personality change. Why should the desires of that hypothetical person, very different from actual me, determine what is my good? Why should actual-me care about what ideal-me wants? See also Robert Adams's discussion of desire satisfaction and informed desire satisfaction views.

I might hope my desires track what is genuinely worthy and desirable and fear they do not. These thoughts seem to presuppose the doctrine known as the **Objective List Theory**. On this view, whether some putative good is really good for a person can in principle be determined independently of that very person's tastes, values, or desires regarding that thing. The Objective List theorist thinks that we can know that certain things make someone's life go better. We arrive at a list of such goods. The question of how intrinsically valuable a person's life was can then be settled, according to this view, by determining to what extent the person over the course of her life achieves the goods on the objective list. For example, if we think that friendship, love, athletic prowess, religious ecstasy, artistic creativity, and intellectual achievement are the objectively valuable goods, we check to what extent a person's life scores high on these various dimensions and sum the total to determine the person's "human well-being score."

The big question for the objective list theory is whether there is any objectivity to be had in this area. If one person says skiing belongs on the objective list and another person disagrees, how is such disagreement rationally settled?

Hybrid views combine two or more of the views already described. Robert Adams suggests that the good for a person might be enjoyment of the excellent. On this view, something improves a person's life only if it is both (a) objectively good and (b) enjoyed by that very person. Derek Parfit suggests that something improves a person's life only if it is all of the following: (a) an item on the objective list, (b) desired by the person for its own sake, and (c) enjoyed by the person. Other hybrid views are formulable.

Objection to Adams: Enjoyment of the nonexcellent, say eating cotton candy, seems genuinely good. And excellent achievement, even if not accompanied by any pleasure/enjoyment, arguably improves the life of the achiever. Compare two lives that are identical, except that in one, there is great but not enjoyed achievement, say excellent hockey playing. That one arguably contains more good, more well-being.