

Higher and lower pleasures

In *The Rationale of Reward*, Bentham said the game of push-pin is equal in value to things like music and poetry. Since it can entertain more people and there is no risk in playing it whereas poetry works by 'stimulating our passions and exciting our prejudices' it might even be considered more valuable. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that early hedonistic utilitarianism was criticized for being 'a doctrine worthy only of swine'. It was accused of not recognising the more cultured aspects of human civilisation.



It was in responding to this objection that Mill introduced the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures. Mill begins by saying that utilitarians have already responded well to this accusation by pointing out that the mental pleasures are better for all sorts of reasons, e.g. "greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc." However, Mill also argues that mental pleasures should be pursued on the basis of their intrinsic superiority. He says,

It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

To identify the higher quality pleasures it is necessary to refer to the preference of competent judges, i.e. those who have experienced both kinds of pleasure.

If one of the two (pleasures) 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... 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...

Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs...

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And, if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.



The pleasures Mill had in mind are the more intellectual pleasures. He is not suggesting that on any individual occasion people would prefer to go to the opera rather than eat a meal but is saying that some pleasures are inherently better than others and that it is reasonable to pursue and encourage others to pursue them even if they are "attended with a greater amount of discontent". It is better to live a life that nurtures the nobler aspects of life than to live a life devoted to satisfying our 'animal appetites'.

A modern argument (i.e. not one put forward by Mill) that makes the same point goes like this. It asks whether you would prefer to be a human that lives for 80 years or an oyster that lives for hundreds or even thousands of years. You can extend the lifespan of the oyster as much as is necessary to ensure it can experience a greater quantity of happiness than the human with a limited lifespan. If you would prefer to be the human then you are either saying that there is something about the quality of human happiness that makes it more valuable than the happiness of an oyster or you are saying there is something in addition to happiness that makes human life worth living.

Problems

1. A common objection is that Mill is a cultural snob. This is a weak criticism for it fails to address the argument that Mill has presented and his claim that people would say it is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied seems, generally, persuasive.
2. Another poor objection is that the so-called 'competent judges' don't always agree on what they prefer. This objection would be fair if Mill was saying that people always prefer the same book or the same piece of music but it is clear that he is referring to different types of pleasure not individual experiences.
3. It is not clear how to 'factor in' these higher pleasures. Quality isn't another criterion like intensity or duration for they are aspects of quantity. The way Mill appears to present things is that quality is in a different class and can 'trump' any amount of quantity. This looks as if Mill is saying the pursuit of higher quality pleasures is worthwhile even if it results in a smaller **quantity** of pleasure. However, Mill denies this saying, '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 the two very different ideas, of happiness, and content.' Perhaps it is to be understood like this—the higher pleasures are often accompanied by a downside (frustration, awareness of ignorance, etc) but these downsides will never make the higher pleasures not worth having; if you have the capacity for these higher pleasures then, because of their intrinsic quality, you will always want to nurture them; and experiencing these higher pleasures will always make you happier.
4. Mill, at the same time, wants to say that the higher pleasures can be identified by noting that the 'competent judges', i.e. those who have the capacity to experience both and have experienced both, will always prefer the higher pleasures, while at the same time acknowledging that they don't always seem to prefer the higher pleasures.

It may be objected, that many who are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good.

It may be further objected, that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both.

Later writers accepted that things like knowledge and beauty were important but, instead of saying these were associated with higher quality pleasures, said they were simply important in their own right, i.e. they abandoned a strictly hedonistic approach.