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Qualitative Pleasure in John Stuart Mill's Utilitarian Ethics: A Review

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ABSTRACT

A significant modification in classical utilitarianism has been done by J.S. Mill in his distinctive distinction between higher and lower pleasures. In contrast to Jeremy Bentham's formulation of utilitarianism, which emphasized the quantitative dimension of pleasure, Mill maintains that differences in the quality of pleasure is to be regarded as no less significant as it contributes to human well-being. The distinction has often been interpreted straightforwardly establishing a hierarchy between intellectual and physical pleasure. But such an interpretation would suffer from neglecting the broader philosophical framework within which Mill develops his account. The present paper re-examines Mill's notion of qualitative superiority by situating it in the broader concern of individuality, human development, self-control and social responsibility. Qualitative superiority of pleasure is essentially associated with the exercise and development of human faculties, which in turn, contributes to individual and collective well-being. Intellectual and literary pleasure might be superior in so far as they cultivate imagination, creativity, emotional development and moral growth; but bodily pleasures, nevertheless, remain essential aspects of a good life. This paper also argues that ethical value of pleasure must also take into account the circumstances in which it is shadowed, the degree of self-regulation involved and the consequences it brings for the individual and other fellow beings. Thus it is finally held that Mill's position retains the basic hedonistic foundation of utilitarianism, while developing a richer account of human flourishing.

Introduction

John Stuart Mill's theory of pleasure occupies a dominant place in the development of ethical position, called utilitarianism. While Mill maintains that pleasure and the absence of pain are essential elements of happiness, his explanation differs significantly from Jeremy Bentham's primarily quantitative account. Mill's utilitarian position upholds the view that pleasures cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of their quantity, because different pleasures can vary in accordance with varying qualities. His differentiation between higher and lower pleasures represents an attempt to offer a more comprehensive explanation of

human well-being.

Mill's argument has caused significant interpretive challenges. It may seem that his claim that some pleasures are higher than others establishes a clear hierarchy between intellectual and bodily gratification. According to this interpretation, intellectual pursuits like reading poetry, contemplating philosophy, and appreciating creative works would be more valuable than physical pursuits like eating and having fun. However, this interpretation falls short of capturing the intricacy of Mill's viewpoint. In order to comprehend his explanation of the qualitative superiority of pleasure it would be important to capture his broader concern with the development of human capacities, which ultimately lead to human flourishing. This perspective is especially pertinent to Mill's discussion of individuality in *On Liberty*. Mill maintains that people should put more effort in developing their capacities to think for themselves. Self-direction rather than merely following the prevailing customs of the society are of significant interest.

Thus he maintains, "It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it" (Mill, 1859, Chapter II, Section 4**).**

From this perspective, the importance of pleasure goes beyond immediate subjective satisfaction. A richer kind of human existence may be made possible by some pleasurable activities that contribute to the development of moral, emotional, and intellectual abilities. Therefore, rather than merely classifying pleasures into mental and physical categories, Mill's theory can be seen as an explanation of how pleasure contributes to human happiness and flourishing.

Classical Utilitarianism: A Revision by Mill

The fundamental tenet of utilitarianism was passed down to Mill from the earlier tradition associated with Jeremy Bentham. Promoting happiness and minimising suffering are the core principles of utilitarianism. According to Bentham, everything is subject to two motives under the principle of utility: "to seek pleasure and shun pain." "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure." "It is for them alone to point what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (Bentham, 1789, chapter I; Burt, op.cit.).

Bentham talked about "hedonistic calculus" as he maintains, "Weigh pleasure and weight pains, and as the balance stands, will stand the question of right and wrong". Rightness consists in pleasurableness; wrongness consists in painfulness. Bentham's utilitarianism is called gross or sensualistic in so far as, for him, any one pleasure is as good as another provided they are equal in quantity. He said "Quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry". Thus in Bentham's moral theory no recognition of qualitative difference among pleasures can be traced. Epicurus, a well-known Greek philosopher, underlined the distinction between the pleasures of our body and those of the mind. For him, the latter is better since it is more durable and less prone to unpleasant outcome. However he did not acknowledge the qualitative superiority of mental pleasure. However, Mill thought that the distinctive characteristics of humans could not be sufficiently explained by a purely quantitative assessment of pleasure. People don't just feel different amounts of pleasure; they also feel different kinds of pleasure that engage different abilities. As a result, Mill

presents the idea of higher and lower pleasures.

"It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and 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" (Mill, 1863, Ch.II). J.S. Mill is the first to hold that qualitative distinction is no less important than the quantitative.

He claims that higher pleasures are specifically linked to the use of intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities, but lower pleasures are associated with more immediate kinds of gratification. The point is that significance of bodily pleasure is not diminished by this distinction; rather, it acknowledges that the development of distinctive human faculties might lead to fulfilment that are more significant to an individual's general well-being. This distinction enables Mill to maintain the fundamental role of pleasure, while avoiding a view of pleasure that is solely dependent on immediate physical gratification. Human beings have unique abilities for reflection, creativity, moral discernment, and self- development. The distinctness of Mill's theory, therefore is that it recognises that a satisfactory explanation of happiness cannot but take into account these human capacities.

Thus, Mill's interpretation of utilitarianisms is different from that position of utilitarianism in which all pleasures are treated at par. The qualitative dimension of human pleasurable experience would not be relevant in ethical discourse if pleasures were the same with respect to quantity alone. But Mill argues that some pleasures are more desirable to persons who are familiar with both types; and so he is in favour of preserving this dimension. This provides the ground for calling Mill's utilitarian position as "refined" in contrast to Bentham's doctrine of "gross" utilitarianism.

Now the question is: what, according to Mill, is the test of quality? He appeals to the 'verdict of competent judges'. "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of and feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the desirable …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" (Mill, 1863, chapter II). Thus competent judges typically choose intellectual pleasures, and not bodily affective pleasures.

The Development of Human Capacities leading to Higher Pleasure

It can now be seen that a deeper understanding works behind Mill's position of preferring intellectual pleasure over physical pleasure. The idea of qualitative superiority becomes more understandable, when considered in connection with Mill's idea of human development. Imagination, emotional sensitivity, moral contemplation, and independent reasoning are all made possible by the higher faculties. In contrast to instantaneous sensual gratification, activities that make use of these higher faculties may contribute to the development of the person.

Mill's emphasis on individuality provides an important background for this argument. He maintains in *On Liberty* that the development of individuality is a crucial aspect of human

advancement.

He writes:

"In Proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others. There is a greater fullness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them" (Mill, 1859, Chapter III, Section 9).

He asserts that the development of higher faculties is important both on a social and personal level, as it not only benefits the individual who develops them, but also increases the individual's potential contribution to the society as well. Pleasure should therefore be viewed as part of a larger process of human development. While reflection and independent judgment can enhance autonomy and self-direction, intellectual and artistic pursuits can broaden an individual's emotional and creative abilities.

Thus higher pleasure is valuable not merely because it is pleasant but also because it may contribute in the formation of a more developing human personality.

The Implication of Poetry and Literary Pleasure

Mill's treatment of poetry and literature provides a particularly useful illustration of qualitative superiority. Poetry and good literature are of significant value, not merely because reading these produce a pleasurable mental sensation, its significance lies partly in its capacity to stimulate imagination, affect emotions and contribute in character-building.

Mill illustrates the transformative potential of poetry from his own experience. From Mill's Autobiography we come to know that during his 'mental crisis', reading Wordsworth's poetry helped him to recover from some difficulty. In a review article on Alfred Tennyson's early poems, he writes, "the noblest end of poetry as an intellectual pursuit, [is] that of acting upon desires and characters of mankind through their emotions, to raise them towards the perfection of their nature (Robson, 1991, p. 414)". He recognized that intellectual argumentation alone could not provide a comprehensive account of human happiness, because emotional and imaginative development also had an important role to play.

Mill observes that lofty literature has a wider cultural and moral function. In *Civilization*, he refers to "the mission of the literature" as being "as an enlightener and improver of the sentiments" (Mill, 1836). Literary pleasure is consequently significant, not only because it is entertaining, but also because it has the potentiality to transform a human personality. Mill's understanding and formulation of poetry and literature as an intellectual pursuit is significant because it connects literary pleasure directly with human development and thereby contribute to the perfection of human capacities.

The contrast between poetry and food should therefore be interpreted within this framework. Food provides necessary physical nourishment and may generate pleasure through the satisfaction of bodily needs. Poetry, in contrast, may stimulate capacities that contribute to intellectual and emotional development. Mill's comparison, however, does not imply that bodily pleasure is intrinsically of no value; rather it brings to light how different

forms of pleasure may contribute to human flourishing in different ways.

Qualitative Pleasure and the Mental–Physical Opposition

Mill's philosophical understanding of pleasure is not adequately reflected in a direct separation between mental and bodily pleasure. When a conscious person experiences pleasure, that state can be produced by both physical and mental activities. Therefore, the most significant point relates to the processes and abilities involved in creating pleasure and also the consequences of those processes. This problem is relevant to Mill's explanation in *A System of Logic*. According to his analysis of emotions and conscious states, pleasure shouldn't be separated into entirely distinct mental and physical categories (Mill, 1843, pp. 52–53). Physical activities are experienced through consciousness, while intellectual activities likewise generate forms of conscious experience.

Intellectual pursuits can develop abilities that significantly improve a person's quality of life. But intellectual pleasure may also be sought carelessly or compulsively; whereas a physical pleasure may be produced in moderation, leading to good health, based on sound judgment. This insight suggests that Mill's theory should be regarded as more flexible than a theory that upholds strict hierarchy between the body and the mind. Thus it is to be recognised that qualitative superiority of pleasure relates more to the contribution that it makes to the development of human capacities, than a mere categorisation of physical or mental.

Self-Control as the Regulator of Pleasure

Mill's theory of qualitative pleasure also involves another fundamental element, called the self-control. Unrestricted gratification of all immediate desires cannot lead to human well-being. People must be able to control their desires in accordance with reason, keeping in mind the concerns of health, personal development and justifiable social commitments. This can be illustrated by considering Mill's treatment of physical pleasure. For instance, eating food is both essential and enjoyable. Satisfying hunger is not demeaning, but at the same time, an excessive indulgence may compromise health and consequently compromise an overall wellbeing. As a result, Mill acknowledges the significance of distinguishing between types of satisfaction based on their consequences (Mill, 1863, Chapter II, Section 7). Intellectual pleasure falls under the same principle. Studying philosophy, reading poetry and literature or involvement with thoughtful discussions may contribute significantly to human development. But such activities do not inevitably become ethically loftier under every circumstance. In pursuing the intellectual gratification if a person deliberately neglects the responsibilities he is supposed to bear towards others, the intellectual nature of the activity does not itself guarantee moral superiority.

Thus what is of utmost importance in qualitative assessment of pleasure is the manner in which pleasure is pursued. Factors that positively influence the value of pleasurable activities are reason, moderation, and self-control. An adherence to these factors makes life significantly pleasurable. Thus Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasure goes hand in hand with his broader concern for the development of independent and responsible individual.

Pleasure and Social Responsibility

Mill's notion of pleasure is closely linked with his explanation of individual liberty. In *On Liberty*, Mill maintains that people ought to be allowed to make choices about their own lives in so far as their actions do not unjustifiably harm other people. Thus, an important prerequisite for human development is the autonomy of the person. The pursuit of pleasure always take place under certain social circumstances. Sometimes pleasurable activities affects the person doing that activity, while some other activities may have ramifications for family, colleagues, or society at large. The ethical assessment of pleasure, Mill maintains, can never ignore the concern of how it affects other individuals.

This point may be illustrated by imagining a person who reads and enjoys poetry or literature all day long. The exercise might be enjoyable both intellectually and emotionally, and it might contribute to personal development too.

But can the pleasure be deemed morally superior just because it results from an intellectual activity? If the person has a clear commitment to care for an elderly or sick parent and deliberately ignores that obligation, Mill holds, the pleasure cannot be considered ethically higher merely because it arises from an intellectual activity. In terms of bodily pleasure a similar argument can be made. A person who enjoys eating may be responding to a legitimate physiological demand. However, the social implications can alter the ethical nature of the behaviour if the person is found to persistently using resources while depriving others of essential meals. These illustrations show that qualitative superiority of pleasure cannot be treated as independent of social context. Evaluating pleasure require considering factors like individual growth, self-control, and the rightful interests of other fellow beings. Intellectual pleasure may neither be automatically regarded as morally superior nor is physical pleasure always demeaning.

Individual Freedom and Human Flourishing

Mill's account of individuality provides perhaps the best foundation for comprehending qualitative pleasure as a component of a philosophy of human flourishing. Mill upholds the view that people must develop their own abilities and use their own judgement in order to be considered as a just individual. Without this kind of development, people cannot transcend passive conformity to societal customs and thus take an active role in directing their own lives. Therefore, the development of higher faculties is really valuable, because it unfolds and expands the possibilities inherent to individuals. A person with the ability for introspection, moral judgement, creativity and self-governing decision-making can experience and pursue those enjoyments that are unattainable for someone whose desires are solely driven by immediate impulses.

But this is not to suggest that everyone should search the same kinds of creative or intellectual enjoyment. Mill's support of individuality, however, does not indicate that he speaks in favour of a single model of ideal good life. There is no unique model of a good life. What matters, instead, is that people should be able to develop their own abilities, to develop their individuality and be free to do so. The connection between social and personal well-being is another significant point to be recognised. According to Mill, each person becomes "capable of being more valuable to others" as their individuality grows (Mill, 1859,

Chapter III, Section 9). Thus, the social dimension to human flourishing is never to be ignored. People who engage themselves in cultivating and developing their abilities can contribute more to the communities or societies they live in.

As a result, Mill's doctrine of qualitative superiority of pleasure might be assessed as a theory that acknowledges that pleasurable experiences can contribute to human flourishing in numerous ways. Reducing his position to the assertion that intellectual pleasures are invariably better to physical pleasures would be deceptive. When intellectual enjoyment nurtures creativity, develops emotional sensitivity, or advances moral growth, it may be superior. A bodily pleasure, on the other hand, may be worthwhile when it supports health, fulfils real physical requirements, and is a part of a responsible and balanced life. On the other hand, either type of pleasure may become troublesome when any of these kinds is pursued excessively or without consideration for others.

Thus, Mill's approach offers a more multifaceted form of hedonism. While pleasure is still treated as fundamental, it is now linked with the individual's development. The accumulation of pleasurable experiences cannot determine the quality of human life. Human beings have several abilities that, as they grow, change their characters and potential for happiness.
This understanding makes it clear why Mill's stand should not be interpreted as an elitist rejection of common pleasures. His goal is not to prohibit bodily enjoyment, but to point out that humans are capable of various types of fulfilment that require the exercise of more developed faculties. In this way seeking the higher kind of pleasure may contribute to a richer way of living.

Conclusion

John Stuart Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures is a significant development in utilitarian ethical theory. By including qualitative distinctions between pleasures and the evolution of human faculties into his concept of human well-being, Mill transcends a strictly quantitative conception of pleasure.

This contrast should not be interpreted as a rigid hierarchy between intellectual and bodily pleasures, though. The value of pleasure necessitates an awareness of personal growth, reason, self-control, and societal concern, as Mill's larger philosophical considerations show. Physical pleasures are nevertheless vital components of human existence, even though intellectual pleasures may be greater in quality since they can foster moral development, emotional experiences, creativity, and judgement.

Therefore, whether a pleasure is merely intellectual or bodily is less important than how that pleasure is pursued, what skills it uses, and what results it creates. Intellectual pleasure pursued selfishly or irresponsibly may fall short of recognising it as superior, while moderate and responsible physical pleasure may positively contribute to well-being of the self and others.

In the end, Mill's philosophy aims to balance pleasure with a more comprehensive understanding of human flourishing. A life with the greatest number of pleasurable experiences cannot exclusively capture a good or happy life; rather it is a life where people

may develop their distinctive abilities, exercise their own judgement, control their impulses, and enhance the lives of others. Thus qualitative superiority does not imply a rejection of pleasure, but an attempt to signify what makes a pleasurable life genuinely valuable.

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