

# Mills higher and lower pleasures philosophy essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Mill claims that “ pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends.” (Mill, p. 187) A few paragraphs later, however, he says that “ it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” (p. 187) Is Mill contradicting himself, or are these two claims consistent?

Mill is rather enhancing instead of contradicting his point of view of utilitarianism by the two claims stated above in the topic. There are two types of pleasures that he introduces here. “ Pleasure, and freedom from pain” imply the lower pleasures which involved purely body sensations (Mill, p. 187). On the other hand, “ being a human or Socrates dissatisfied” indicates higher pleasures associated with moral sentiments (Mill, p. 187). While an animal could be fully happy with a life of lower pleasures, a human being could not fully be happy unless attention was paid to these higher pleasures. In this paper, I firstly intend to provide an explanation of Mill’s distinction of “ higher” and “ lower pleasures regarding these claims. Secondly, I shall introduce the method of calculating overall utility (Mill refers as “ the only thing desirable as ends”) considering both quantities and qualities involving these claims (Mill, p. 187). Thirdly, I will interpret how these two claims stated in the top consistent. Last but not least, I shall reply some objections rose from the discussion.

What does Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures suggest? When Mill introduces the notion of higher pleasures he is clearly discussing, among other things, intellectual pursuits and activities as well as pleasures of aesthetics and sympathy. An adequately satisfying human life must thus contain “ pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of

the moral sentiments, which have a much higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensation" (Mill, p186). Mill delineates how to differentiate between higher and lower quality pleasures: A pleasure is of higher quality if people would choose it over a different pleasure even if it is accompanied by discomfort, and if they would not trade it for a greater amount of the other pleasure (Mill, p. 187). Moreover, Mill contends, it is an " unquestionable fact" that, given equal access to all kinds of pleasures, people will prefer those that appeal to their " higher" faculties. A person will not choose to become an animal; an educated person will not choose to become ignorant, and so on. Even though a person who uses higher faculties often suffers more in life, he would never choose a lower existence, preferring instead to maintain his dignity. Arguing that pleasures of the intellect are of a higher nature whereas sensual pleasures or the ' animal appetites' are of a lower nature, Mill claims that it is " better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (Mill, p. 187). Mill also attributes the nobility of higher pleasures as accounting for their higher value and believes that ' competent judges' have a sense of dignity which has them prefer intellectual pleasures over sensual ones (Mill, p. 187).

How do we judge and calculate the overall utility of an action? 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. (Mill, p. 187)" Pleasure and the absence of pain are, by this account, the only things desirable as ends in themselves, the only things inherently " good." Thus, any other

circumstance, event, or experience is desirable only insofar as it is a source for such pleasure; actions are good when they lead to a higher level of general happiness, and bad when they decrease that level. While Mill also argues that pleasure can differ in quality, and that pleasures that are rooted in one's higher faculties should be weighted more heavily than baser pleasures. Mill placed great importance in the type of pleasure one experiences. Once people are made aware of their higher faculties, they will never be happy to leave them uncultivated. When making a moral judgment on an action, utilitarianism thus takes into account the quality of the pleasures resulting from it. In addition, according to utilitarianism, it is not moral for people just simply to pursue what makes them personally happy. Rather, morality is dictated by the greatest happiness principle; moral action is that which increases the total amount of utility in the world. In other words, quantity also matters. Every human being tries to promote his or her own happiness, and avoid unhappiness. This is natural, not ethical. Promoting happiness becomes an ethical theory when it is applied to all human beings, not just ourselves. Mill's utilitarian calculus thus figures out how many people are affected by an action, how they are affected, and therefore whether the action is right or wrong. Thus, the Greatest Happiness Principle tells us that an action is right in so far as it promotes happiness in all people affected by that action, and wrong in so far as it brings unhappiness to the people affected by that action.

In this particular case regarding the claims stated in the topic, it basically proposed the following experiment: one is a soul about to be allocated a life. He is offered either the choice of a great philosopher or that of a pig. The

philosopher has a long, prolific career involving great success and enjoyment but the pig can only experience the most primitive sensual experiences possible. Should one choose the apparently insatiable yet intellectually active life of a philosopher or the voluptuous life of an ancient pig (Mill, p. 187)? In accordance with Mill's utilitarianism, the choice to opt for would be that of the philosopher. Although the pig's life consists of far greater quantities of sensual pleasure, no amount of this lower pleasure, however prodigious, could compensate for one's existence devoid of inherent higher faculties and the ability to experience higher pleasures. Therefore, the total happiness one derives during their lifetime is not directly proportional to pleasure. When one considers the maximum possible happiness they can derive from their existence, elements other than pleasure quantity must be considered. Also, being a human being rather than a pig and being a philosopher rather than a fool brings more utility to the society, more people can benefit from these choices. Thus, quantities matter here as well. These choices are promoting more happiness, thus should be adopted.

Some objections may rise from the above discussions. Some people may say that some higher pleasures are accompanied by discomfort, why people would choose it over the lower pleasures, would it bring less happiness? This objection here confuses the happiness with contentment. People who employ higher faculties are often less content, because they have a deeper sense of the limitations of the world. However, their pleasure is of a higher character than that of an animal or a base human. That is why Mill writes, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (Mill. P. 187). Thus the people best qualified

to judge a pleasure's quality are people who have experienced both the higher and the lower. There are different qualities of pleasure, and only people with a broad range of experiences can dictate which pleasures are of a higher quality. Furthermore, Mill observes that even if the possession of a "noble character" brought less happiness to the individual, society would still benefit. Thus, because the greatest happiness principle considers the total amount of happiness, a noble character, even if it is less desirable for the individual, is still desirable by a utilitarian standard.

From all the reasons stated above, Mill does not contradict himself with the two statements made in the topic. While an animal could be fully happy with a life of lower pleasures, a human being could not fully be happy unless attention was paid to these higher pleasures. Purely sensation pleasures are good; however, higher sentiment pleasures are more profound as they promote more happiness both qualitatively and quantitatively.