

Reconciling the contradictions of mill's preference-based utilitarianism



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In Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill advances the “greatest happiness principle,” which “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness...[and] by happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain.” [1] Mill supplements the “greatest happiness principle” with the argument in Chapter II that some types of higher pleasures are intrinsically of a greater value than others, as competent judges prefer them even though they are attended by a lesser degree of pleasure. However, it is difficult to defend the anti-hedonist principle of higher pleasures as a central doctrine of Mill’s hedonist utilitarianism. Given that hedonism considers one pleasure of a finite amount as equal to another pleasure of the same finite amount, it seems that qualitative distinctions between pleasures cannot be reconciled without importing value-based principles foreign to traditional hedonism. This conflict is further complicated by the implications of Mill’s conclusions on virtue. Mill claims in Chapter IV that virtue has no superior intrinsic value, despite its preferred status – it is merely instrumental to happiness. It quickly becomes evident that the higher pleasures of Chapter II are unlike the virtue of Chapter IV: the higher pleasures are intrinsically more valuable, whereas virtue’s value lies only in its preference. In Chapter IV, Mill provides a new framework for his preference-based utilitarianism – based on a dichotomy between will and desire – which offers a means to attempt reconciliation between the inconsistent implications of Mill’s conclusions in Chapter II and IV. Nonetheless, it becomes evident that Mill’s theory of utilitarianism cannot be supported, as the distinction between will and desire proves to be an insufficient antidote against the internal contradictions of his preference-based utilitarianism.

In Chapter II, Mill posits his view of preference-based utilitarianism. It is possible to distinguish between two interpretations of this form of utilitarianism: the first claims that it is the satisfaction of our preferences that has value, and the second claims that it is the objects of our preferences that have value. In Chapter II, Mill clearly aligns himself with the second form of hedonist utilitarianism. Mill's argument in Chapter II seeks to answer an essential phenomenological question: Is an object valuable because we prefer it or do we prefer an object because it is valuable? Mill argues for the latter: the intrinsic value of the object precedes the preference and a competent judge's preference for one object of pleasure over another indicates a superior intrinsic value in that object. Note that this argument is largely contingent on the competence of the judge. Mill develops the following argument in Chapter II as justification for his initial position on preference-based utilitarianism:

Pleasure Preference Argument

A) " Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all of almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable [and valuable] pleasure" (9).

B) " Those who are equally acquainted with and capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties" (9).

C) Therefore, the pleasures which employ the higher faculties are more desirable and valuable.

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Assuming those who are equally acquainted with both types of pleasure in Premise B act irrespective of any moral obligation to prefer it (a requirement of Premise A), and the judges are competent and well acquainted with both pleasures, the argument is deductively valid. Mill's argument may even be defended against the objection that an object being desired is not desirable, per se – Mill uses “desirable” to mean necessarily desired, but this conclusion may not follow from the fact that the object is desired. However, Mill would likely respond that the “competent judges” will always be successful in identifying the more valuable pleasure and so for these wise judges, the higher value object will always be desired. Therefore, Mill could argue that those pleasures of higher faculties, always preferred by the competent judges, are necessarily desired – or desirable – at least to the competent judges. Because a full investigation of the conditions necessary to be a competent judge is well beyond the scope of this paper, Mill's argument will be accepted. Additionally, Mill claims that the higher value of the preferred pleasure is more clear in those instances where they prefer one object of pleasure “even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent” (9), or less pleasure. If this is the case – and if the judges are truly competent and unmistaken in their preference – then Mill's argument is sound.

Mill then distinguishes between satisfaction and happiness, demonstrating that pleasure and happiness are not necessarily the same. Mill argues “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” (10). It should be noted here that Mill does not say that it is better to be Socrates unhappy than a fool happy –

happiness and satisfaction are not synonymous. Mill is incredibly clear: “Whoever supposes that this preference [for the pleasure of higher faculties] 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” (9). And again, Mill claims that the satisfaction of the higher pleasures brings a greater amount of happiness, even when accompanied by “a greater amount of discontent” (9), or a lesser amount of pleasure. Therefore, it becomes unmistakably clear that while satisfaction/contentment are obviously not synonymous with happiness, pleasure is not the same as happiness either. However, this seems to be in conflict with Mill’s earlier definition of the ‘greatest happiness principle,’ in which he claims “by happiness is intended pleasure” (7). The only conceivable solution to this contradiction is the following: even if pleasure is the sole constituent of happiness (according to Mill’s earlier claim), not all pleasures contribute equally to happiness: the pleasures of the higher faculties contribute more to happiness than do the lower pleasures.

Mill’s valuation hierarchy of pleasures becomes more difficult to defend, however, once he addresses the concept of virtue in Chapter IV. In this chapter, Mill arrives at conclusions regarding the relationships between pleasure, desire and happiness that seem to directly contradict the implications of Chapter II. Mill’s utilitarianism “maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself” (36). However, Mill explains that this is merely a psychological phenomenon: an individual may originally desire an object (virtue) as a means to pleasure, but as he becomes more and more habituated into this mode of behavior, he

may cease to look beyond this object of his originally instrumental preference. This object then becomes a final preference, pursued as an end in itself. Mill is clear that virtue does not gain a higher degree of value through this normative phenomenon, but is desired more nonetheless. Mill even relates the instrumental desire for virtue to a miser's desire for wealth, as both are merely means to happiness that become conflated with ends in themselves. Ultimately, Mill concludes that virtue becomes a part of happiness, as it is pursued as an end yet happiness is derived from it. A person who desires virtue "is made, or thinks he would be made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by the failure to obtain it" (38). And Mill argues that preferences make those preferred "sources of pleasure more valuable" (38). Thus, while Mill argued in Chapter II that the pleasures of the higher faculties are intrinsically superior in value to the lower pleasures, Mill argues in Chapter IV that virtue's value lies predominantly in the desire and preference for it.

Mill then claims that based on his explication of the psychological phenomenon surrounding virtue's status as a part of happiness, it is evident that "to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences) and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing" (39). However, in Chapter II, Mill demonstrated that competent judges desire those higher pleasures that will bring them the most happiness, even when they are attended by less pleasure or more pain. Mill's previous argument in Chapter II was based on the assertion that not all pleasures contribute equally to happiness, and so the "competent judge" will desire those objects of pleasure that contribute the most to happiness. Based on Mill's previous

argument, if an individual merely desires those objects that are the most pleasant (as Mill argues should be the case in Chapter IV), then he may only attain the lower pleasures of sensuous objects and will never attain happiness. Mill would refer to this individual as a “satisfied fool” in Chapter II, as opposed to the unsatisfied Socrates who still possesses more happiness than the fool. It seems that Mill’s position in Chapter II cannot be supported in light of Mill’s later claim that the desirable is the same as the pleasurable.

At the end of Chapter IV, however, Mill provides an explanation to this seeming contradiction and provides a new framework in which to reevaluate the higher pleasures in Chapter II and virtue in Chapter IV: “the will is a different thing from desire” (39). Mill continues to explain that will is an active phenomenon and is different from the passive sensibility of desire for pleasure. Mill explains that will “may in time take root and detach itself from the parent stock” (40), and through mere habit, an individual may desire an object only because he wills it. This may explain how virtue can be desired for itself, even when accompanied by less pleasure, and also may explain the phenomenon of the higher pleasures being preferred, and even desired, despite their providing a lesser degree of pleasure than the lower pleasures offer.

Nevertheless, Mill clarifies that “will, in the beginning is entirely produced by desire” (40). Therefore, the competent judge’s will toward the pleasures of higher faculties in Chapter II must be preceded by desire for them. Given Mill’s claim in Chapter IV that we only desire that which is pleasurable, it becomes necessary that at some point in the past, the pleasures of the higher faculties were accompanied by a greater degree of pleasure than

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were the lower, sensuous pleasures. This desire must have later transformed to will and even after the pleasure derived from the higher pleasures decreased to less than that of the lower, sensuous pleasures, the will remained and desire for the will formed out of habit. On first glance, this seems to be an effective reconciliation of Mill's treatment of higher pleasures in Chapter II based on the framework provided in Chapter IV.

Mill challenges this new theory, however, when he claims in Chapter IV "that which is the result of habit affords no presumption of being intrinsically good" (41). Yet he claimed in Chapter II that the higher pleasures are intrinsically "more valuable than others" (8). As it becomes a necessity to consider the competent judges' preference for higher pleasures a habitual preference – in order to avoid the contradiction that is present when an individual desires an object which affords less pleasure than other objects (from Chapter IV) – it becomes impossible to maintain that the higher pleasures are intrinsically more valuable than the lower pleasures in Chapter II. Clearly, the conclusions drawn by Mill in Chapter II cannot be reconciled with the contradictory conclusions of Chapter IV.

In Chapter II, Mill "assigns to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation" (8) – even though the pleasures of the higher faculties are accompanied by less pleasure than the lower, sensuous objects. In Chapter IV, Mill argues that the pleasures of virtue are "sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures," (41) – even though they too may be accompanied by less pleasure than the primitive, lower pleasures. On first glance, these conclusions seem to be in agreement.

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However, Mill posits in Chapter II that the higher pleasures are intrinsically more valuable than lower pleasures, whereas he claims in Chapter IV that the preference for virtue is the source of its value and that one can only prefer an object that gives less pleasure than another based on simple habit. Mill argues at the end of Chapter IV that people are mistaken to value these objects of habitual preference over other more pleasurable objects and, in doing so, directly opposes his assertion that higher pleasures have more intrinsic value than lower pleasures which are subjectively more pleasurable. Thus, the additional happiness derived from higher pleasures is merely additional happiness derived from habitual action. Perhaps these contradictions could be explained through an investigation of the temporal relations at play, as the preference of higher pleasures occurs at one instant in time whereas the preference for virtue is formed over a certain length of time. However, without this additional inquiry, Mill's position on higher pleasures simply cannot be reconciled with his treatment of virtue.

[1] Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Ed. George Sher. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001. Print. 7