

## **A NEW CONCEPTION OF HUMAN WELFARE: MILL'S UTILITARIANISM**

John Stuart Mill embraced Bentham's utilitarian political philosophy, but rejected Bentham's quantitative hedonistic conception of human happiness, with its conception of the human good as desirable mental feelings, varying in intensity and duration. Bentham, he thought, had a limited understand of human beings and human happiness. Bentham, he says, overlooked the importance in human life of the desire for perfection, the feeling of conscience, a concern for self-respect, the place of honor and dignity, the love of beauty, order, power and action. Mill's alternative view of the human good assigns a central place to the development of our distinctively human powers, and to the active exercise of those powers. And not simply their development: more particularly, Mill emphasized the *self*-development of our powers—their development guided by values chosen by the agent him/herself, what he calls "individuality". And he used that conception of the human good as the basis for his distinctive version of a liberal political morality.

**1. How does Mill understand *utility*?** The central idea in Mill's alternative to Bentham's theory of the human good is his distinction between higher and lower quality pleasures. I will start by exploring the intuitive idea, and then examine the distinction more closely.

- Human beings, Mill emphasizes, are distinguished from other animals by our mental powers: our powers of discriminative perception, judgment, reasoning, imagination, and moral and aesthetic evaluation. Mill's thought is that

a way of life—a "manner of existence"<sup>1</sup>—organized around activities that use those powers is better than one that is not, no matter how much dissatisfaction attends the life. Satisfaction consists in achieving what you aim for. So the life that uses our distinctive powers is better, even if the person leading it fails to achieve his/her aims. Thus, the life of a human being dissatisfied is a better, happier life, than that of a pig satisfied (2.6); the life of Socrates dissatisfied is better than that of a fool satisfied.<sup>2</sup>

- Why is it better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied "fool, dunce, or rascal"? The answer would be easy if the "better manner of existence," with its exercise of human powers, always brought greater feelings of joy, satisfaction, lust for life, and friends. But that's not true: the satisfied fool does not aim very high but achieves everything he aims for; Socrates dissatisfied aims high and does not achieve everything. Suppose, as Socrates urged, we reflect on lives: we examine them and set ourselves more ambitious goals, involving a fuller use of our human powers. But when we set our sights high, some of our aims are bound to go unfulfilled, and we will more likely be dissatisfied: aim high, fall far. A person with higher aspirations, Mill says, "requires more to make him happy, [and] is [therefore] capable of more acute suffering" (2.6).

So why is a reflective life better—a happier life—than an unreflective one, even if the reflective life involves much disappointment, more Benthamite pain, and so a smaller balance of pleasure over pain? Why not aim low, achieve all, and steer clear of anguish?

**2. Why is life of Socrates dissatisfied a better, happier life?** We can find some answers in Mill's theory of higher quality pleasures, which he presents in the second chapter of *Utilitarianism*, in paragraphs 2-10.

- Mill agrees with Bentham that pleasure is the sole thing that is good in itself, and not for its consequences (2.2). But he rejects Bentham's conception of pleasures as "interesting perceptions," and seems to think of pleasures as activities that we enjoy engaging in. When, for example, I say that I get great pleasure from teaching, I am not reporting an interesting perception I get from teaching, but indicating that, for example, I enjoy spending time teaching and prefer it to other activities, perhaps as a part of my conception of happiness. So what is desirable for itself and not for its effects are certain enjoyable activities.

- One pleasure (enjoyable activity) is better or "more valuable" than another if and only if "competent judges" in general prefer the one to the other (2.8).<sup>3</sup> For Mill, the value of a pleasure is determined not by its intensity and duration, but by the preferences—the rankings of activities—by competent judges who determine the value of those activities.

- A "competent judge" is a person who is well-positioned to judge the value of different sorts of human activity. What makes someone well-positioned for this task? This is a puzzling issue, but we may get some help by thinking of aesthetic judgments. We might say that the value of works of fiction, or poetry, or musical composition—how good they are—is fixed by the rankings of competent judges: there is no further fact beyond their assessments. Now what makes someone a competent judge of music? The person must know a great deal about

music, have good auditory perception, and be experienced at making judgments. In parallel, Mill suggests three conditions, of acquaintance, susceptibility, and opportunity.

1. The competent judge must be well-informed, "competently acquainted with" the different sorts of pleasure (2.5): we are to look to the "feelings and judgments of the experienced" (2.8).
2. "Equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures" (2.7), that is, capable of enjoying different kinds of pleasures;
3. In a position to make effective choices among different sorts of pleasure—that is, the judgments must not be idle, but should have some real bearing on the conduct of the judge's life.

So the goodness of a pleasure is not fixed by its intensity and duration, but by the rankings of individuals who meet these three conditions—of acquaintance, susceptibility, and opportunity—that make them good judges of different sorts of human activities.

- A pleasure, then, is of *higher quality*, that is qualitative better—and not simply of greater quantity—just in case "all or almost all" competent judges show a "decided preference" (2.5) for it. I emphasize that being preferred by most competent judges is what makes the pleasure of higher quality: there is not further fact that makes a pleasure of higher quality, no independent test.

- A person *decidedly prefers* one sort of activity to another just in case the person would not choose a life from which the activity is absent, regardless of the level of discontentment contained in that life (2.5). The sign of decided

preference, and therefore of higher quality pleasure is, then, an unwillingness to make trade-offs—“to resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of” (2.5).

- What, then, are the higher quality pleasures? Where do we see such unwillingness to trade-off? Competent judges show—as a matter of “unquestionable fact” a decided preference for a “manner of existence which employs their higher faculties” (2.6). The “higher faculties” are the human capacities for reasoning, judgment, discriminative feeling, etc. Mill claims, then, that competent judges—who are competent in virtue of meeting the conditions of acquaintance, susceptibility, and opportunity—decidedly prefer lives involving the exercise of human powers: because the competent judges prefer them, the modes of existence with those pleasures are better modes of existence.

- Mill’s claim is about what is good for human beings—about the qualitatively higher value of certain pleasures. But he makes this claim on the basis of the preferences of a class of competent judges. Why does he identify what is good for human beings generally by reference to the judgments of a select group: isn’t this identification founded on intellectual elitism? The answer, I believe, is that Mill treats the preferences of the competent judges as evidence for what human beings generally would decidedly prefer. Presuming a common human nature, he supposes that anyone who meets the conditions of acquaintance, susceptibility, and opportunity required for competent judgment would prefer such a mode of existence. Of course Mill knows that many people have not lived lives with higher quality pleasures: their preferences seem to be at

odds with those of the competent judges. But he suggests three explanations for the apparent counter-evidence, corresponding to the three conditions on competent judges.

First, people sometimes pick the lower in favor of the higher because they lack “a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher” (2.7): they lack sufficient *acquaintance* with the range of alternatives.

Second, others may lose their capacity for higher enjoyments as a consequence of neglect of that capacity (2.7): they do not “knowingly and calmly” (2.7) reject the higher, but have lost their *susceptibility* to it.

Third, there may be limits on *opportunity* (2.7, 13-14). Thus, people lack material resources, or health, or education, or liberty, or live in conditions that encourage selfishness. But the choices made with such restricted opportunities should not lead us to revise our view about the human good. (2.14): “In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, everyone who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable; and unless such a person, through bad laws or subjection to the will of others, is denied the liberty to use the sources of happiness within his reach, he will not fail to find this enviable existence, if he escapes the positive evils of life, the great sources of mental and physical suffering—such as indigence, disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection.”

So we look to the preferences of competent judges in determining what is good. But competence does not come from being a special breed of human

being. Mill's judges are not like Plato's philosopher kings, whose nature, Plato thinks, uniquely suits them for reasoning their way to what is truly good. Instead, we look to the competent judges because they have been in a position to make informed judgments; and we expect that others, in a similar position, would have made similar judgments.

- Assuming this decided preference for lives involving the exercise of the higher faculties: what explains it? Why accept the predictable shortfall between aspiration and achievement? Mill explains it by reference to our sense of our human dignity (2.6). Awareness of the distinctively human capacities awakens in us a sense of dignity in the possession of these powers. This sense of dignity then elicits a desire to develop and to express our powers. Once we are aware of these powers—"made conscious of them" (2.4)—we will not be able to "regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification" (2.4).

So why is it better to be Socrates than the fool, a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied? The Socratic/human mode of existence is calls on us to exercise our human powers. That mode of existence is decidedly preferred, when people have the information, susceptibility, and opportunity needed to make sound judgments about how best to live: understandably in view of our sense of our own dignity. And what more do we have to go on in assessing the relative value of lives than such informed judgments?

**3. How does Mill's account of the human good lead to his defense of liberty?** Mill adopts Bentham's principle of utility, then, but his new conception of the human good transforms utilitarian political philosophy and, in so doing, leads to a distinctive form of liberalism. The force of this point about Mill's distinctive brand of liberalism will emerge more fully in our discussion of *On Liberty*. But it will help in understanding the special cast of Mill's utilitarianism and the link to his form of liberalism if I briefly sketch the contrast now between Benthamite and Millian views about the utilitarian foundation of liberty.

Like Bentham, Mill thinks that human liberty is an important value because it contributes to happiness, which is the only thing good in itself.

But happiness, Mill says, is not simply a matter of experiencing agreeable feelings; correspondingly, liberty is not important simply because it enables people to pursue these feelings. Rather liberty is important for two reasons: it enables people to evaluate what is worth pursuing (to become competent judges), and to pursue the aims we settle on: to govern our own conduct in light of those evaluations. In brief, liberty fosters self-government. But self-government is an important good because we govern ourselves by using our human powers, and the experience of self-government promotes our sense of dignity. So self-government is not simply a means to the best life but an essential component of it.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of higher quality pleasures—that a life involving the active expression of human powers is a better life—lies at the heart of Mill's political conception. It explains his emphasis on the importance of self-government in



politics and in economic affairs, and accounts for his hostility to the subordination of women. More immediately, it provides the basis for the defense of religious, moral, and expressive liberty that lies at the heart of his liberal outlook. Mill thought that he had provided a better understanding of the value of liberty by connecting it with the positive sources of human dignity—the higher qualities pleasures of self-regulation—instead of rooting that value, as Bentham did, simply in the feelings of pain that follow when our conduct is restricted. Mill was not so much worried about the pains that come from restrictions as he was about the ways that restrictions would lead us to aim for less, and substitute painless satisfaction for real happiness.

- Mill's strong commitment to personal liberty, is not, then, rooted in the skeptic's idea that we can never know the best way to live, nor in the pragmatist's idea that we keep the peace by adopting a "live and let live attitude." Instead, his defense of personal liberty and toleration is founded on the striking premise, drawn from his theory of higher quality pleasures, that self-governing lives are better lives.

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<sup>1</sup> *Utilitarianism*, chap. 2, 6. Here after all reference to *Utilitarianism* will be included in the text, abbreviated as *Um.n*, for chap. m, paragraph n.

<sup>2</sup> And, in *On Liberty*, he adds that it is "better to be a John Knox than an Alcibiades, but ... better to be a Pericles than either." See *On Liberty*, chap. 3, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Note that this is true not only on the dimension of quality. Even on matters of quantity, the natural dimensions are not dispositive in fixing the value. See U2.8.

<sup>4</sup> "Where (not the person's own character) but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness. . . .John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, chap. 3, 1.