

Happiness, pleasure and preferences¹

Utilitarianism is the theory claims that an action is right if it *maximises* happiness, i.e. if it leads to the greatest happiness of all those it affects. Otherwise, the action is wrong. But what is happiness and is it worth seeking?

HAPPINESS AS THE AIM OF LIFE

The founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, argued that happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. John Stuart Mill agrees with this, but says that the exact relation between pleasure and happiness needs further clarification. Happiness is not, he argues, ‘a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement’, a life of rapture, ‘but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing’. Thus variety, activity and realistic expectations play an important role in how our pleasures make up our happiness.

Is happiness, understood like this, a realistic goal to aim at? Yes, says Mill, many people can experience it. The main obstacles are a poor education and poor social arrangements that lead to lack of opportunity and inequality. Of course, we can’t expect good fortune all the time - we will all experience disease and the loss of people we love. But the main sources of human suffering are things that we can diminish over time.

Is a life seeking happiness - understood as pleasure and the absence of pain - a good and worthwhile for human beings? Or does utilitarianism degrade human beings in valuing only pleasure? In his essay on Bentham, Mill sympathises with the objection applied to Bentham’s view of happiness. Bentham didn’t really understand human nature, Mill argues; ‘If he thought at all of any of the deeper feelings of human nature, it was but as idiosyncrasies of taste’. According to Bentham’s felicific calculus, ‘quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry’ (push-pin was a very simple child’s or gambler’s game). Mill rejects the view that pleasures and pains are all equally valuable, and in *Utilitarianism*, he provides an alternative account of human nature that answers the objection.

HIGHER AND LOWER PLEASURES

Mill argues that the claim that utilitarianism degrades human beings misunderstands what human beings take pleasure in. Some types of pleasure are

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 212-220

'higher' than others, more valuable, more important to human happiness, given the types of creatures we are and what we are capable of.

Which pleasures? How can we tell if a type of pleasure is more valuable (quality) than another, rather than just more pleasurable (quantity)? The answer has to be to ask people who know what they are talking about. If everyone (or almost everyone) who has experience of two types of pleasure prefers one type to the other, then the type that they prefer is more valuable. To ensure that they are considering the quality and not quantity of the pleasure, we should add another condition. A pleasure is higher only if people who have experience of both types of pleasure prefer one even if having that pleasure brings more pain with it, or again, even if they would choose it over a greater quantity of the other type of pleasure.

Mill argues that, as long as our physical needs are met, people will prefer the pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination to pleasures of the body and the senses, even though our 'higher' capacities also mean we can experience terrible pain, boredom and dissatisfaction. For example, as Tennyson said in his poem 'In Memoriam A.H.H.', 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all'. We can say the same about intelligence and artistic creativity - better to have the pleasures that they bring, even though they cause us pain and distress, than to be unintelligent or lack creativity.

Thus Mill compares a human being with a pig. As human beings, we are able to experience pleasures of deep personal relationships, art and creative thought that pigs are not. We can experience new and deeper kinds of pain as a result. Yet we don't think that the possibility of pain would be a good reason for choosing to be a well-looked-after pig, rather than a human being. 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied'. This preference, Mill thinks, derives from our sense of dignity, which is an essential part of our happiness.

In introducing this distinction between higher and lower pleasures, Mill rejects Bentham's felicific calculus - the idea that we can simply 'add up' how much happiness some action produces, and adds the element of quality to the quantitative analysis of happiness that Bentham puts forward.

Discussion

It is important to note that if Mill's prediction here is wrong - if people with the relevant experience do not prefer the pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination to other pleasures, then these are not higher pleasures. So we can object that people do *not* reliably pursue the 'higher' pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination instead of the 'lower' pleasures related to the body and the senses.

Mill accepts the point, but argues that it is no objection. First, there is a difference between preference and action. We can choose what we know to be less good, whether from weakness of will or laziness or other factors. We still recognise that what we did not choose is more valuable.

Second, appreciating the higher pleasures can be more demanding. Our ability to experience higher pleasures can be undermined by hard work, lack of time,

infrequent opportunities to experience them, and so on. We may seek lower pleasures simply because those are more readily available to us. Not just anyone's preference counts as deciding whether a pleasure is 'higher' or 'lower'. As with any question, we need to consult people who know what they are talking about. Having been to an art gallery once doesn't count as having experienced the pleasures of art, and listening to just one pop song doesn't count as having experienced the pleasures of pop music. Mill says that one pleasure is higher than another if almost everyone who is 'competently acquainted' with both prefers one over the other.

IS PLEASURE THE ONLY GOOD?

Smart on hedonistic and non-hedonistic utilitarianism

As we have seen in the case of Bentham and Mill, utilitarians can disagree about what is good, and so about which consequences or 'states of affairs' are best. Bentham thinks that we should concern ourselves only with the quantity of happiness caused while Mill thinks matters are more complicated, and we need to take into account the quality of happiness as well (higher v. lower pleasures). This question of what is good is the focus of J.J.C. Smart's discussion in his book *Utilitarianism*. Is only pleasure good? Is only happiness, understood as involving both quantity and quality of pleasure, good? Is anything other than pleasure or happiness good? In connection with the last option, Smart mentions G E Moore, who thought that some other states of mind, aside from pleasure, are also good, such as knowledge. Smart calls Moore an 'ideal' utilitarian, as opposed to the 'hedonist' utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill.

How might Bentham respond to Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures? He could say that our preference for higher pleasures is not because such pleasures are qualitatively better, but because they are more 'fecund' - they are likely to produce *more* pleasure either for others or for ourselves in the long term. For example, if we enjoy thought, then we may produce greater benefits for society, e.g. through scientific research.

Yet, Smart claims, Mill seems right that pleasures are not all equal - if they were, a contented sheep is as good as a contented human, so perhaps, to maximise happiness, we should decrease the human population and increase the number of cared-for sheep! It seems that most of us, at least, do prefer the pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination - perhaps because human beings are intellectual creatures: we owe our survival in evolutionary terms to our intellect, not our bodily strength or speed.

To try to understand our preferences for certain pleasures further, Smart asks us to imagine a scenario in which someone is wired up to electrodes in his brain, so that just by pressing a button, he could give himself intense sensual pleasure reliably and with no ill-effects. What should we say if he came to prefer this to anything else, and spent all his spare time doing this? What if we knew that most

people would feel the same if they were wired up? Is this a picture of a good or happy life, one we should bring about as the maximisation of happiness?

Smart argues that while we can understand that the electrode operator is *contented*, and even that we would be contented if we became electrode operators, we simply don't want to become electrode operators. We want to do more with our lives than that, to achieve things, and if someone were to force us to become electrode operators, we would not now thank them for it, but be made unhappy by the prospect. The same applies to Mill's dictum 'Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied'. Socrates would not want to be a fool, even knowing that after he became a fool, he would be contented.

Smart argues that our responses here are not a matter of the quality of the pleasure, as Mill thinks, but our *attitude* towards it. To say that someone is *happy*, and not just contented, is to express approval of their pleasures. Because we think a life as an electrode operator is wasted, we do not think such a person 'happy', only contented, and we would not want such a life for ourselves. Of course, Mill rejects this analysis: he says that when we judge pleasures as higher or lower, we should put aside all considerations of morality, of whether we *ought* to prefer the pleasure to another. Smart claims we don't do this - we prefer certain pleasures to others and our approval of them is an aspect of this.

Smart concludes that Mill's position is not a form of *pure* hedonism after all. Pure hedonism recognises pleasure as the only good and sole criterion for what we ought to bring about. Such a view can only defend the place of higher pleasures in terms of their fecundity; they are not 'higher' at all. But Mill's concept of happiness is evaluative, because happiness is pleasure of which we approve. And so it is not pure hedonism.

Is pleasure always good?

Mill and Bentham agree that pleasure is always good. But imagine a world in which there is just one person, who believes (falsely) that elsewhere in the world, other people are being tortured. This thought delights him a great deal; he is a sadist. Is his pleasure bad? Would the world be a morally better place if this belief caused him sadness?

Smart defends the hedonist position: it is good that he feels pleasure at the thought of their suffering, because at least he is happy, and no one else is, in fact, suffering. Our difficulty in accepting this is that in the real world, sadistic thoughts and pleasures often cause *actual* suffering. In other words, they lead to morally bad consequences. But we need to separate this from whether they are bad in and of themselves, 'intrinsically'. No pleasure, Smart claims, is intrinsically bad; it is only ever bad if it causes pain (to the person themselves or others).

NOZICK'S EXPERIENCE MACHINE

In his discussion of the electrode machine, Smart contrasts our desire for pleasure with our desire for achievements, and then talks of happiness as not only involving

contentment, but approving of our contentment. We can question whether this really gets to the bottom of our desire for achievement.

In *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Robert Nozick asks us to imagine being faced with the chance of plugging in to a virtual reality machine. This machine will produce the experience of a very happy life, not only with many and various pleasures and few pains, but (the experience of) many successful achievements. If we plug in, we will not know that we are in a virtual reality machine. We will believe that what we experience is reality. However, we must agree to plug in for life or not at all.

Nozick argues that most of us would *not* plug in. We value being in contact with reality, even if that makes us less happy, even if we experience fewer achievements. But we can't understand this in terms of the 'pleasure' of being in touch with reality, or a preference for certain types of pleasure over others, because if we were in the machine, we would still experience this pleasure (we would believe we were in touch with reality). Instead, what we want is not a *psychological state* at all; it is a *relation* to something outside our minds. Smart is right that we want achievements; but we want *real* achievements, not just the psychological state of experiencing an achievement. Nozick concludes that we cannot understand what is good just in terms of our subjective psychological states, such as pleasure.

PREFERENCE UTILITARIANISM

One solution to the complications around pleasure and happiness facing hedonistic utilitarianism is offered by preference utilitarianism. Preference utilitarianism is a form of non-hedonistic utilitarianism that argues that what we should maximise is not pleasure, but the *satisfaction of people's preferences (desires)*.

1. If Nozick is right, we prefer to be in touch with reality, but not because it brings us pleasure. Having this preference satisfied is valuable. For a preference to be satisfied, it must be satisfied in reality. It is not enough that the person thinks their preference is satisfied.
2. We can also appeal to preferences to explain Mill's claims about higher and lower pleasures. He defends the distinction in terms of what people prefer. However, rather than talk about the value or quality of types of pleasure, we could argue that whatever people prefer is of more value to them - whether or not most people would prefer pleasures related to thought, feeling and imagination.
3. The satisfaction of many of our preferences will bring us pleasure, but many will not. For instance, Bentham and Mill do not distinguish between producing happiness and decreasing pain. But are these morally equivalent? If people more strongly prefer not to suffer pain than to be brought pleasure, then that would explain the thought that it is more important not to cause harm. Or again, we can also argue that people have preferences about what happens after their death, e.g. to their possessions, and it is

important to satisfy these as well, even though this cannot bring them any pleasure.

In sum, preference utilitarians can argue that they offer a more unified account of what is valuable than hedonist utilitarianism. We can continue to claim that happiness is the only good if we now understand happiness as one's desires being satisfied. Pleasure is important, when it is, because it results from satisfying people's preferences.

They can also argue that they simplify Smart's theory. Smart argues that happiness is good, but he understands happiness in terms of those pleasures we approve of. But Smart offers no further explanation of this approval. People simply do or don't approve of certain pleasures. But shouldn't we approve of what is good? In other words, shouldn't a theory of what is good say what we *should* approve of, rather than explain what is good in terms of what we *do* approve of (with no further reason)? Preference utilitarianism can say that what is good is maximising the satisfaction of people's preferences. That many people prefer certain pleasures to others is enough reason to prioritise those pleasures; approval isn't relevant.