

John Stuart Mill on Epicurus

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Higher and lower pleasures^[edit]

Mill's major contribution to utilitarianism is his argument for the [qualitative](#) separation of pleasures. Bentham treats all forms of happiness as equal, whereas Mill argues that intellectual and moral pleasures (*higher pleasures*) are superior to more physical forms of pleasure (*lower pleasures*). He distinguishes between happiness and [contentment](#), claiming that the former is of higher value than the latter, a belief wittily encapsulated in the statement that, "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be [Socrates](#) dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question."^[74]

This made Mill believe that "our only ultimate end"^[77] is happiness. One unique part of his utilitarian view, that is not seen in others, is the idea of higher and lower pleasures. Mill explains the different pleasures as:

Quote

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference [...] that is the more desirable pleasure.^[78]

He defines **higher pleasures** as mental, moral, and aesthetic pleasures, and **lower pleasures** as being more sensational. He believed that higher pleasures should be seen as preferable to lower pleasures since they have a greater quality in virtue. He holds that pleasures gained in activity are of a higher quality than those gained passively.^[79]

Mill defines the difference between higher and lower forms of pleasure with the principle that those who have experienced both tend to prefer one over the other. This is, perhaps, in direct contrast with Bentham's statement that "Quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry",^[80] that, if a simple child's game like [hopscotch](#) causes more pleasure to more people than a night at the [opera house](#), it is more incumbent upon a society to devote more resources to propagating hopscotch than running opera houses. Mill's argument is that the "simple pleasures" tend to be preferred by people who have no experience with [high art](#), and are therefore not in a proper [position to judge](#). He also argues that people who, for example, are noble or practise philosophy, benefit society more than those who engage in [individualist](#) practices for pleasure, which are lower forms of happiness. It is not the agent's own greatest

happiness that matters "but the greatest amount of happiness altogether".[\[81\]](#)