

John Stuart Mill on Epicurus

Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 7:14 AM

I ran into this passage (from [the Continuing Challenge of Epicureanism by Michael Kenneth Wilson](#)) and at some point I'll move this to a better place to find in the future. Looks like pages 99 and 100 are worth finding and reading

John Stuart Mill observes that the original followers of Epicurus were likened to pigs for making pleasure their chief end. Similarly, Utilitarians, have sometimes been lampooned for reviving such a doctrine. When Epicureans were called pigs they responded that such an accusation assumed that human beings are not capable of any pleasure other than what pigs can experience. Consequently, it was their accusers who were really guilty of degrading human nature. Indeed, Mill recognizes, “...there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasure 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.” 12

11 John Stuart Mill, “Higher and Lower Pleasures” in *Philosophy: Basic Readings* (ed. Nigel Warburton; London:

Routledge, 1999) 99.

12 “Higher and Lower Pleasures”, 100.

Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 7:17 AM

From Wikipedia:

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]

Post by "Joshua" of September 8, 2022 at 11:56 AM

Quote

As it was, his aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality: first, by setting up fictitious excellences—belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human-kind—and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtues: but above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes

indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.

-The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill, on his Father

Post by “Pacatus” of September 8, 2022 at 5:36 PM

I remember Mill only from my days as an economics student – Mill being classified as a utilitarian. “Utility” in economics means – not some measure of particular usefulness (e.g., a serviceable crescent wrench) – but a measure of pleasure or satisfaction (or alleviation of the opposites on a continuum).

Although, in terms of utilitarian social ethics, generally expressed as “the greatest good for the greatest number,” it really would mean the greatest happiness/pleasure/satisfaction for the greatest number. But that is not really subject to a strict formulation/calculus. (And I have suggested that Rawls’ theory of justice might provide a useful addendum.)

Modern neoclassical microeconomics followed Mill in its pursuit of “utility maximization.” But Herbert Simon, with his theory of “satisficing” (as opposed to maximizing) behavior, I think comes closer to Epicurus. (As I tried to address briefly in the thread “Natural Wealth and Natural Goods in Epicureanism”.)

The French philosopher Michel Onfray, in his book *A Hedonist Manifesto*, links Epicurus to the utilitarians (i.e., Bentham and Mill) to move from a personal to a social ethics.

Post by “Cassius” of September 8, 2022 at 5:49 PM

My dim recollection of JS Mill comes from reading "On Liberty" many years ago. I remember liking it at the time, but I can't really remember why. I definitely have never read through his work with an eye toward how he was interpreting Epicurus, or making points similar to Epicurus. That's probably well worth doing and anyone who has done it or wants to do it and has pointers would be very welcome to post in this thread!

Post by “Cassius” of September 12, 2022 at 8:10 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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)

I would think the really big issue that these two sentences do not address is whether Mill was arguing that these qualitative differences are in any way "absolute" / "intrinsic" and apply to all people at all times or whether he was clear that the differences are subjective/ relative to the individual under particular circumstances.

That would be a huge distinction. I hope to read up and find the answer myself but if anyone knows where he clarifies this please feel free to post.

Post by “Martin” of September 12, 2022 at 2:12 PM

Mill himself makes no claim to originate this but rather refers to unspecified earlier writers and seems to imply that it originates from Epicurus himself:

"But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign 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. It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former — that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone."

(John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter II, from <http://fair-use.org/john-stuart-mill/utilitarianism>)

Post by “Cassius” of September 12, 2022 at 3:26 PM

Thank you Martin! I read so far the first half of Chapter 2 from your link. There is a lot to like in it but I am taken aback by this following section. It is not entirely clear to me how to read this. Maybe in the end it does acknowledge that the ranking is individually subjective. But it sure looks like he is saying we can add up the opinions of the greater number of people and from that "majority vote" attain (he even uses the word "suffrage") what amounts to an objective decision - at least one that is considered as such. Hopefully there is more that makes clear that this is not his conclusion, but the attribution to the utilitarians the term "greatest good of the greatest number" sounds like it may apply here too.

Maybe he explains somewhere why (social concerns?) he reaches such a conclusion. Or better yet, maybe he backs away from this later.... I understand that Aristotle suggested that we look to the majority of leading citizens for our standard of ethics, but I know nothing in Epicurus which indicates that rankings of pleasure and pain could or should be decided by the greatest number of people. Maybe this is the kind of "practical" thing that one is "forced" to do when someone tries to develop a system of government among people of widely varying natures, but it sure does not strike me as philosophically defensible or accurate to "the truth" of the way real people actually feel.

From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgment declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.

Post by "Joshua" of September 12, 2022 at 5:55 PM

Part of that text is black, [Cassius](#)

Post by “Cassius” of September 12, 2022 at 6:28 PM

Thanks - color hopefully fixed now