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## John Stuart Mill on The Good Life: Higher-Quality Pleasures

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One important question in ethics is what makes people's lives go well for them. Philosophers have proposed various theories about what things in and of themselves make people better off, i.e., theories of "well-being."

Many such theories say that pleasurable experiences are at least part of what makes our lives go well. But do some types of pleasure contribute more to our well-being than others?

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) answers "yes." This discussion explains why.

### 1. Mill's Hedonism

Mill contends that pleasure is not merely one thing that contributes to our well-being, it's the only thing. Similarly, only pain makes us worse off. Mill thinks that a person's life goes well for her just insofar as she is happy.

Mill defines "happiness" as pleasure and freedom from pain. In his *Utilitarianism*, he describes the best life as "an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments."<sup>[1]</sup> This theory of well-being is called "hedonism."<sup>[2]</sup>

Mill's case for hedonism comes in Ch. 4 of *Utilitarianism*, in his so-called "proof of the principle of utility."<sup>[3]</sup> There he contends that "the sole evidence ... that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it."<sup>[4]</sup> Because pleasure is the only thing that we desire for its own sake, Mill argues, we can know that it's uniquely valuable.

### 2. Bentham and Pushpin

An earlier utilitarian philosopher, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), also subscribes to hedonism.<sup>[5]</sup> However, his hedonism differs significantly from Mill's.

For Bentham, how much a pleasurable experience adds to our happiness is strictly a matter of how much pleasure it contains. This in turn depends on the intensity of the pleasure and how long it lasts. So two factors, *intensity* and *duration*, determine a pleasurable experience's value.

Bentham sees the source of pleasure as irrelevant to its value. He compares reading poetry with playing the mindless game "push-pin."<sup>[6]</sup> As Mill summarizes Bentham's conclusion, "quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry."<sup>[7]</sup>

### 3. "Qualitative" Hedonism: A Plurality of Pleasures

While Bentham may believe that pleasure is a single feeling that's present in all pleasurable experiences. In contrast, Mill believes that there are distinct varieties of pleasures; a person may enjoy both reading poetry and running, but the pleasures these activities yield can have entirely different "feels."

It's therefore possible that some "kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others."<sup>[8]</sup> Mill believes that some are; certain qualitatively superior pleasures add more to our happiness than an equal or even greater quantity of others. For Mill, therefore, the value of a pleasurable experience depends on *three* factors: intensity, duration, and (unlike Bentham) *quality*.

### 4. The Competent Judges Test

How do we compare the quality of pleasures? Mill says that we must consult people who have enjoyed both. Only they are competent to make this comparison. If they unequivocally desire one more strongly, then it's of higher quality:

Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure.<sup>[9]</sup>

Note the continuity with Mill's "proof": the sole evidence that one pleasure is *more* desirable is that people do actually desire it *more strongly*.

Mill believes that the results of this test are apparent. While virtually everyone has experiences of bodily pleasures that we share with animals, only some

people are sufficiently mentally cultivated to enjoy the distinctly human “pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments” to any extent.<sup>[10]</sup> Those who are, he claims, decidedly prefer them:

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties.<sup>[11]</sup>

This lets Mill answer the objection that hedonists would approve of a person’s living a life “worthy only of swine,” as long as she enjoyed it.<sup>[12]</sup> His qualitative hedonism can explain why, although such a life would have *some* value (since lower-quality pleasures have some value), she’d be far happier and much better off were her life rich in higher-quality pleasures.<sup>[13]</sup>

One practical upshot of Mill’s view is the importance of providing an education sufficient for enjoying higher-quality pleasures to everyone. People lacking such preparation may not appreciate why these pleasures are superior, but they’re not competent judges:

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 a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.<sup>[14]</sup>

## 5. Unanswered questions

Some important questions about Mill’s views do not receive clear answers. One is whether there are qualitative differences between pains. The other is just how much more valuable than bodily pleasures higher-quality pleasures are. Clearly he considers them *significantly* more valuable; controversially, some scholars believe that he considers them *infinitely* more valuable.<sup>[15]</sup>

## 6. Conclusion: Is Mill’s Qualitative Hedonism Plausible?

Mill may seem to underrate the value of bodily pleasures. His view could seem to entail that we should all spend as much time as possible on “rarified” activities like museum visits and opera, and none on “exciting” pursuits like sports or sex.

However, people with developed faculties can find higher-quality pleasure in diverse activities and combined with other pleasures. Someone who knows football well may derive intellectual and aesthetic

pleasure from it, along with less refined pleasure in the collisions. Sex can be both emotionally fulfilling and physically pleasurable. Mill suggests that the best lives combine tranquility and excitement.<sup>[16]</sup>

It also bears mentioning that Mill had a somewhat unusual life, starting with a childhood that involved little if any play. So he may not have been entirely competent to judge some bodily pleasures himself.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Notes

[1] Mill 1969b, 214.

[2] The word *hedonism* comes from the Greek word *hēdonē* (“pleasure”).

[3] For an introduction to this argument see my [Mill’s Proof of the Principle of Utility](#).

[4] Mill 1969b, 234.

[5] In its simplest form, *utilitarianism* is the moral theory that says that actions are right if they would maximize the total amount of happiness in the world in the long run; otherwise, they’re wrong. Utilitarianism is a version of the type of moral theory called *consequentialism*. For an introduction to that type of theory, see Shane Gronholz’s [Consequentialism](#).

[6] For a description see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Push-pin\\_\(game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Push-pin_(game)).

[7] Mill 1969a, 113.

[8] Mill 1969b, 211.

[9] Mill 1969b, 211. Note that Mill admits that even people “with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority” of higher-quality pleasures sometimes give in to the temptation to choose lower-quality pleasure instead (Mill 1969b, 212). Those who do so too often may lose the ability to enjoy the higher quality pleasures altogether, since “Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed” (Mill 1969b, 213).

[10] Mill 1969b, 211.

[11] Mill 1969b, 211. Note that Mill’s requiring that people really have enjoyed the pleasure in question, not merely that they’ve participated in the activity that can potentially give rise to the pleasure. Forcing someone who has not learned to appreciate classical music to sit through a symphony doesn’t make them a competent judge of the aesthetic pleasure that fans of the symphony derive from it. Arguably they’re not acquainted with the *pleasure* at all, even if they’re

acquainted with the symphony, but they certainly aren't capable of appreciating and enjoying it.

[12] Mill 1969b, 210.

[13] Mill suggests that even earlier utilitarians like Bentham were able to answer this objection adequately without introducing the notion of qualitative distinctions between pleasures. They could say, for example, that we can enjoy intellectual and aesthetic pleasures for much longer than bodily ones, and without the same painful aftereffects (e.g., hangovers) (Mill 1969b, 211). But by invoking this notion Mill is able to make an even more powerful answer.

[14] Mill 1969b, 212. In virtue of his belief that the employment of our distinctly human faculties produces superior pleasures, Mill's hedonistic understanding of happiness bears some resemblance to the Greek philosopher Aristotle's decidedly non-hedonistic understanding (Aristotle 1999, 1–18). While Mill rarely acknowledges Aristotle as an influence, this is one of several echoes of Aristotle's thought in his.

[15] E.g., Riley 2003. For a contrasting interpretation, see Miller 2010, 58–9. Part of what's at issue here is how to read the sentence "If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account" (Mill 1969b, 211). Points of disagreement include 1) Whether Mill believes that the 'if' clause of this sentence is satisfied every time that one pleasure is of higher quality than another, or only in certain cases where the qualitative difference is especially great, 2) Whether to "resign" the higher quality pleasure means to lose the ability to enjoy the pleasure altogether or only to give up only a small amount of it, e.g., five minute's worth, and 3) What Mill means by "of small account."

[16] Mill 1969b, 215. Mill might consider it a mistake for a person ever to choose lower-quality pleasures at the expense of higher-quality ones. But that doesn't mean that he believes that we should try to abstain from lower-quality pleasures altogether. Many activities that are just ordinary parts of our everyday lives, like exercise, involve some lower-

quality pleasures. Often, as already remarked, we can be enjoying lower-quality pleasures in company with higher-quality intellectual and emotional ones, and the combination would be more valuable than either alone. And perhaps sometimes we just need to rest our higher faculties for a while, to recharge them for later use and let us enjoy more higher-quality pleasure in the long run. So enjoying bodily pleasure doesn't always mean enjoying less mental pleasure.

Perhaps it may still seem like the best life for us is one that involves a bit more bodily pleasure than Mill believes. But if he has persuaded you that that the pleasures that come from exercising the distinctly-human faculties are sufficiently superior to the bodily pleasures that the best life is one in which the former would greatly predominate over the latter, then he might well be satisfied even if there is still some lingering disagreement over just how great this predominance should be.

[17] Note that while as a hedonist Mill believes that only pleasure (and freedom from pain) are valuable, his account of the qualitative differences between pleasures holds significance as long as pleasure is among the things that have value, even if there are others.

## References

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## For Further Reading

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