

# **PLEASURE, PREFERENCE, AND HAPPINESS: VARIATIONS ON THEMES FROM MILL**

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**ABSTRACT:** Mill's qualitative hedonism has been subject to much debate. It was formulated to strike a balance between classical hedonism and perfectionist conceptions of happiness and many have thought that either it is an abandonment of hedonism or that it collapses into a mere observation on what actually provides the greatest quantity of pleasure. Here it is suggested that a doctrine along the lines suggested by Mill might be defended if the role of our preferences is understood in terms of some ideas defended in a couple of papers by Wlodek Rabinowicz.

## **1. Hedonism and Mill's Project of Reconciliation**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially if one understands it as the long century reaching from 1789 to 1914, was a period of great transition, with significant economical, technological, and cultural changes taking place. One of the most important cultural changes was the gradual emergence of egalitarian ideals as the dominant cultural form. Not that elitist or aristocratic ideals had disappeared at the end of the period or that

egalitarian ideals were not very much present already at the outset of it, but the balance between them shifted. Philosophy was certainly involved in this process of change, although the issue of cause and effect is too complex to discuss here, and in ethics specifically, the rise of utilitarianism as a doctrine of the human good, right action, and reasonable legislation is one of the clearest examples of the movement in an egalitarian direction. Jeremy Bentham, with his dictum that “[p]rejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry”,<sup>1</sup> was perhaps the most forceful proponent of a conception of the human good, or happiness, that placed all sources of enjoyment on an equal level – all that mattered was the quantity of pleasure that one could get from something. This was in stark contrast to the perfectionist conceptions of happiness presented by ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, where true happiness was really only achievable by a minority of a hierarchical society.

John Stuart Mill, writing his treatise *Utilitarianism* at the mid-point of this long century was the heir to the utilitarian legacy, to the ideas developed by his father James Mill and Jeremy Bentham. But he was also a person on whom the writing of perfectionist intellectuals like Thomas Carlyle, who chastised ideas like those put forward in utilitarian thought as “pig philosophy”<sup>2</sup>, made an impression and for whom the encounter with

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<sup>1</sup> *The Rationale of Reward* (London, J. & H. L. Hunt, 1825); Book III, Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> The outlines of which are presented in the seventh of his 1850 *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, see *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, vol. XX (London: Chapman and Hall, 1898).

poetry was a vital part of his emergence from the life-crisis that he suffered in his early twenties.<sup>3</sup> So perhaps one should not be surprised that Mill had to struggle with his hedonism and that, in the end, he tried to import perfectionist elements into it by maintaining that different pleasures might not just vary in quantity but in quality as well.

Even if egalitarian views and values have since then consolidated their pre-eminence, there have during the last few decades been a few notable philosophical voices that have argued for at least a partial return to Aristotelian ideals concerning the role of wisdom and discernment in leading our lives well<sup>4</sup> and perhaps there is still a real need to discriminate qualitatively between different potential sources of well-being. At the same time, Aristotle's ideas as they stand are probably too tied up with life in Greek city-states in order for anyone now to simply import them straight off. This makes Mill's attempt at a reconciliation between hedonism and perfectionism especially interesting even today. The problem is just that while Mill made a number of suggestive remarks on the matter, not that many have felt that he really expounded his doctrine in a clear enough manner and perhaps he might not be able to really maintain his

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<sup>3</sup> This is characterized in his autobiography. It was particularly the poetry of Wordsworth that helped him during this period, see *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*, ed. A. O. J. Cockshut (Halifax: Ryburn, 1992), Chapter V.

<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre is probably the most well-known example, see *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). For some more recent uses of Aristotelian ideas, see Timothy Chappell (ed.), *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, forthcoming).

compromise. The well-known move made by Mill in order to account for this, namely the introduction of the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, is one that clearly might stretch hedonism to a point where it turns to something else. If quality matters, and for Mill quality has to do with being connected to the higher faculties and of not just being sensuous, then why not say that there are two things that make up the human good: sensuous enjoyment and intellectual accomplishment? On the other hand, if we try to steer clear of such separation and build quality tightly into the very feelings of pleasure, then we run the risk of simply making an empirical claim that is probably false, that intellectual pleasures are in some way much more pleasant than merely sensuous ones. Such a move would also seem to reduce quality to mere quantity.<sup>5</sup>

There is clearly a tension here, but at the same time this tension is also what makes Mill's writings on these matters so interesting for contemporary philosophers: the fact that we cannot straight away see how he is supposed to achieve his sought-after reconciliation prompts us to consider just to what extent hedonism can actually accommodate perfectionist ideas about the human good. Can Mill be read in a way that allows him to strike the proper balance between hedonism and perfectionism, a balance in which most of the weight is put on the foot that remains on hedonist ground, but where a significant step is still taken into perfectionist territory with the other foot? In what follows here I will argue

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<sup>5</sup> This was noticed already by other 19th century philosophers, perhaps most clearly F. H. Bradley, see his *Ethical Studies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), Essay III.

for this possibility. The suggestion will be that if we read Mill's remarks on the role of the preferences of competent judges as being not just of an epistemic kind but of a metaphysically constitutive one as well, then we can make sense of the relation between pleasure and happiness in a way that still stays true to Mill's basic project.

It should be noted here that the issue of interpreting and developing hedonism is not just a concern for Mill scholars or utilitarians since one need not be either one to be interested in formulating a more sophisticated form of hedonism. Take a model non-utilitarian like Kant, although he does not really present a fully developed theory of happiness, it could certainly be argued that he too was a hedonist (at least with regard to the prudential component of the highest good).<sup>6</sup> Hedonism is also compatible with a wide range of other moral theories (although not Aristotelian virtue ethics). Of course, if we do adhere to a theory like classical utilitarianism, that relies on felicific calculus in order to determine what is right and wrong, we will be disinclined to accept a hedonism that is too sophisticated to serve this purpose; but as it so happens the interpretation of Mill's hedonism that will be presented in this paper does allow for quantitative measures in a quite straightforward way so it is neutral when it comes to choices between deontological and utilitarian moral theories.

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<sup>6</sup> For a good discussion of this aspect in Kant, see Barbara Herman, "Rethinking Kant's Hedonism", Alex Byrne, Robert Stalnaker, and Ralph Wedgwood (eds.), *Fact and Value: Essays on Ethics and Metaphysics for Judith Jarvis Thomson* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

Now, philosophical texts are always read against a certain background of ideas about the issues at stake, the set of viable options pertaining to them and the argumentative field of contention between these options. The problem for any contemporary reader of works from the history of philosophy is that this background is now different; even if the debate in question forms a continuous line of discussion from now back into the past, new concepts and distinctions will have been introduced, new basic positions and combinations of positions will have been made possible. For instance, in Mill's day, to be a hedonist was primarily to be in opposition to perfectionist conceptions of the human good, but nowadays to be a hedonist is also to be in opposition to the idea that welfare consists in preference satisfaction. Naturally, Mill does not position himself in terms of this second opposition, and yet, his conception of the human good is one where preference and pleasure are interwoven with each other in interesting ways.

To this date, Mill's reconciliatory position is one with which philosophers have wrestled; there seems to be *something* there, but when one tries to explicate it, things tend to slip through one's fingers. Perhaps Mill simply tries to square the circle and the only reasonable hedonism is a non-perfectionist one? That might very well turn out to be the case, but at any rate it is not a rare case in philosophy that someone presents a picture of a specific problem that suggest that he or she really has a "feel" for the issues at stake and then proposes a solution to it, yet where it is not all that clear what the solution amounts to. But while this might seem unsatisfactory, it is also something which makes a philosophical text come alive for contemporary readers, the fact that one can not just read it and understand it in a straightforward way but that one has to wrestle with it and, ultimately, perhaps even bring something of one's own to the table. Of

course, what one is doing then is not history of philosophy in a strict sense; it is philosophy in conversation with a historical philosopher.<sup>7</sup> As a conversation, this exercise is certainly one-sided, but the basic text is not just a source of inspiration, it is also a source of resistance. And when philosophers use the mighty dead as conversational partners it is also this resistance that they seek. Even though what ultimately matters is whether the ideas that one will formulate through this exercise are reasonable or not, the struggle of having to wrestle with a text, the words of which (although certainly not the interpretation) are more or less written in stone, can be a very fruitful one. One might put it like this: what a writer like Mill actually says is logically compatible with a number of different positions and what is attempted in a text like the present one is to engage in a sort of dialogue where one attempts to find a reading that is not too much resisted by the text and which presents a coherent philosophical position, the basis of which in this case is formed by certain distinctions and ideas concerning preferences and their role in constituting happiness.

The main topic of interest here is Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures, but the argument will be that to understand this distinction we have to look not at the composition of our pleasures as such, but rather

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<sup>7</sup> What Richard Rorty discusses as the "rational reconstruction" approach in "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres", Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Section I.

at the way in which our preferences operate and how they constitute certain things as desirable.

## **2. The Role of Preference**

In the utilitarian tradition the main alternative to hedonism as a conception of what it is that we are supposed to bring into being is the preference (or desire) theory. Indeed, while the classical utilitarians were invariably hedonists, comparatively few contemporary utilitarians hold this view.<sup>8</sup> Yet, even if it is now the dominant form, the preference theory comes in different versions and, as shall be seen, on one understanding of it, it can actually even be used to underpin the kind of hedonism that Mill stands for. It has been suggested that we need to distinguish between two main versions of it, one according to which it is the satisfaction of our preferences that has value and one according to which it is the objects of our preferences that have value.<sup>9</sup> While the first is a substantive axiological position about which concrete things actually have value, the second is a doctrine about what it is that grounds values. What unites both theories is

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<sup>8</sup> For some exceptions, see Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) and Torbjörn Tännsjö, *Hedonistic Utilitarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Wlodek Rabinowicz & Jan Österberg, "Value Based on Preferences: On Two Interpretations of Preference Utilitarianism", *Economics and Philosophy* XXII (1996), 1-27.



the key role accorded to our preferences and in a way both positions are monistic. Given the satisfaction interpretation, the monism is straightforward: only preference satisfaction has positive value. Given the object interpretation we also get a kind of monism: only objects of preference have positive value. But it is a monism that leaves open the number of types of objects that actually have value; and philosophically this is a question that comes alive if we proceed to put at least some restrictions on which preferences that count, *e.g.* that only preferences that are informed and sufficiently thought through provide a real ground for the values of their objects. Perhaps the number of things that are ultimate objects of the appropriate kind of preferences will be too many to list, perhaps it will turn out that there is just one ultimate goal for such preferences. This is an open question the answer to which in part depends on descriptive matters of human psychology, in part on normative matters of how we philosophically should understand ideals of what it means to be informed *enough* and having *sufficiently* thought something through.

That Mill is not an adherent of the satisfaction version of the preference theory is obvious, but his idea that pleasure is the sole final good is readily compatible with the object interpretation. Indeed, if we accept that theory, the fact that we do desire pleasure does certainly become something capable of serving as proof of the value of pleasure. Or rather: if it is the case that humans that live up to certain normative conditions of sensible agency ultimately desire pleasure, then that makes it reasonable to see pleasure as not only a *de facto* goal but also as an appropriate goal. The object interpretation of the preference theory can make sense of why one, like Mill, can move from facts about what *is* desired to what *ought* to be desired without committing a fallacy. It would be anachronistic to simply

say that then Mill must have been an adherent of this theory all along, but we can certainly say that this approach presents a way of making sense of much of what Mill says. Although, of course, argumentatively one is certainly not off the hook just because one can appeal to the object interpretation since that means that one has taken on a new burden of proof. But at least it is better than having a fallacious argument.

Now, the object interpretation has an important advantage over the satisfaction interpretation in that it seems to fit better with the phenomenology of valuing: if we wholeheartedly desire something as an end, is it not that thing rather than the satisfaction of our preference that we understand as valuable? Yet, on the other hand, phenomenological considerations might also pose a significant problem for this way of tying value to the objects of our preferences, the reason being that when we desire something we tend to feel as if we respond to a goodness that is in the object before we start desiring it. Do we not get things the wrong way around if we suggest that values track our preferences, rather than vice versa? And, to be sure, if we turn to Mill specifically there are grounds for doubting whether he saw the role of our preferences as metaphysically constitutive of values rather than just playing an epistemic role – does he not imply that desire functions analogously to our senses and that we thus, through the operations of the faculty of desire, discover a goodness that is already there?<sup>10</sup> Here we encounter one of those aspects where the problem

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<sup>10</sup> Crisp puts this point strongly: “The deliverances of the competent judges, then, are *evidential*. They are a tribunal to which we refer to decide what is true

is one having to do with the field of possibilities. Mill does not consider the difference between epistemological and ontological roles for our preferences. Neither does he, of course, locate his position on the metaphysics of value in terms of the rich set of distinctions and options of varieties of value realism that the continued philosophical debates on these matters have generated by now. This means that we should be wary of just taking statements that would mean certain things, were someone in the current state of the discussion to utter them, as indicating that Mill meant those very things. So here the reasonable strategy is either to let Mill be or to treat him as a conversation partner and see what happens if we fill in the blanks in different ways; there is probably no single definitive reading, but different readings might be resisted by the actual text to varying degrees. We could never legitimately say that Mill thought that the preferences of competent judges play no epistemic role, but there is an opening for doubting whether he should be understood as maintaining that they play nothing but an epistemic role.

Mill does not present any view of how values fit into the basic furniture of the world that we inhabit. What he seems to be saying is that when we all desire something, or when people that there is reason to believe are competent judges desire something, then there is little more to say about the matter: that thing is not just desired, it is desirable. This need not be interpreted as saying that we have reason to believe that in these cases we have pierced through the veil of appearance and peered into the world of

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independently of any human judgment,” *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 36.

values. Rather, when our judgments are in accord in this way, that puts an end to discussion about whether something is merely desired – it is also desirable. This means that while these values might be, so to speak, metaphysically soft, the deliverances of at least the competent judges can be understood as not just evidential, they are constitutive of what actually is desirable and what is not.

To put Millian hedonism in terms of the object interpretation of the preference theory yields a position that has many similarities with what might be called the “ontological interpretation”<sup>11</sup> of the role of the *phronimos* in Aristotle’s ethical theory, although it would involve different ideas about what exactly a standard-setting person would ultimately want. Mill’s notion of competent judges is probably not as demanding as Aristotle’s notion of the *phronimos*,<sup>12</sup> but both philosophers can be read as saying that the judgments of those human beings that have cultivated their

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<sup>11</sup> I borrow this notion from T. H. Irwin who uses it in the notes to his translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to designate one of two interpretations of the role of the *phronimos* in Aristotle’s ethical theory: “(a) Ontological: The good person’s approval constitutes something as good, and it is not good independently of being chosen. (b) Epistemological: Things are good independently of being chosen, and the good person is the one who can be relied on to approve of the things that are genuinely good” (207).

<sup>12</sup> For Mill, competence is a matter of having actual experience of the relevant pleasures and of being capable of appreciating them. When it comes to intellectual pleasures, this latter feature might not be something that we possess without certain training and refinement.

natural capabilities in certain ways are constitutive of what is worthwhile to pursue and what is not.

### **3. Higher and Lower Pleasures**

While Bentham might have found pushpin and poetry as equally worthwhile pursuits (at least as long as they yielded the same amounts of pleasure), Mill clearly found this anti-perfectionist aspect of standard hedonism troubling and in one of his most quoted and well-known passages he asserted that “[i]t is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”<sup>13</sup> It should be noted here that Mill does not say that it is better to be an unhappy Socrates rather than a happy fool – happiness and satisfaction do not amount to the same thing – rather, what he is maintaining is that a Socrates who has not achieved all he would want to achieve is still actually happier than a fool who has achieved all he could long for; this is certainly a quite Socratic thing to say – but is it what a hedonist should think?

Mill’s own attempt at making sense of his judgments about the value of these different lives involves his well-known distinction between higher and lower pleasures, a distinction that is claimed to be qualitative rather than quantitative. But how should we understand the difference in quality? He himself has the following to say: “[T]here is but one possible answer.

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<sup>13</sup> *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Chapter 2, § 6.

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>14</sup> And he continues: “Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating both, do give a marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties.”<sup>15</sup> As an empirical observation the unquestionable nature of this last passage might quite possibly be questioned. What cannot be questioned is the key role it plays in Mill’s argument: it is central. We might call it *Mill’s conjecture*.

It is at this point that we can see the difference that can be made by understanding the role of preference in Mill’s theory along the lines of the object interpretation. The problem for Mill is otherwise that if we look at the pleasures as such, then we seem to be forced to introduce some extra feature of them, one which is not a necessary component of pleasure but which is desirable and which raises the desirability of the pleasures in which we find it. This puts Mill’s hedonism in danger. It would seem that then there are two things that are valuable.

However, on the reading that I would like to suggest here the increased desirability is not to be explained by any proper part of the pleasure, but rather simply in the brute fact of Mill’s conjecture: those whose judgment leaves us nothing more to say about the matter happen to desire certain pleasures more than others, hence these are more desirable or valuable. We

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, § 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, § 6.

might perhaps be able to account psychologically for why their preferences have this character and if we are true to Mill, this is an account that would involve a story about our higher faculties, but this is simply a story about the causal background, not about the contents of our preferences.<sup>16</sup> Of course, given that we do have these preferences we are justified in saying that certain pleasures have a qualitative feature; it is just that this feature is not part of them in the same way as its other features, like intensity and duration. When we desire a certain pleasure this feature is not part of why we desire it, it is there because we desire the pleasure in a certain way. Accordingly, even if we discriminate between different pleasures what we desire is simply pleasure, and hedonism would then be true: the only thing that is ultimately desirable is pleasure. It is just that it is a brute fact about us that our preferences are such that we prefer certain pleasures to others even if they are equal in intensity and duration. However, even if a higher pleasure is in one sense on a par with a lower pleasure, *i.e.*, they are of equal intensity and duration, the higher pleasure might still be greater in the sense that is relevant to our happiness because then we have to include the qualitative features of the respective pleasures as well. So on the Millian account, as understood here, the value of a particular pleasure is completely dependent on the magnitude of the desire – it is just that, barring differences in quality, the strength with which we prefer certain pleasures

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<sup>16</sup> A metaphysical explication of the backgrounding role that preferences can serve in grounding values is given in Wlodek Rabinowicz & Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, “A Distinction in Value - Intrinsic and For Its Own Sake”, *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* C (1999), 33-52.

to others will reasonably be in proportion to the respective quantities of these pleasures.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, it might be objected, would not this interpretation reduce the difference between higher and lower pleasures to merely a difference in degree when Mill explicitly pronounces “the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*”<sup>18</sup>? But on this interpretation there is precisely a difference in kind at work since the ground for preferring higher pleasures is distinct from those essential aspects that make up the magnitude of the pleasure as such (like duration and intensity), *i.e.* they are not preferred on account of giving us more of what the lower pleasures give us. The difference in kind between pleasures is simply based in a difference in kind in the way that competent judges see them: some pleasures are connected to human ideals, and they are such that, because of this, competent judges hold them especially dear, other pleasures are just plain pleasures. Since, on this Millian account, the contributive value of particular pleasures is dependent on the preferences that would be held by a

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<sup>17</sup> To be exact, unless one already is a fully competent judge, there are two desires that are relevant for the value of a particular pleasure. First, one’s own desire with respect to that pleasure, which corresponds to its quantity and, then, the desire of a competent judge for a relevantly similar pleasure, which sets the quality. How great the pleasure is, as contributor to one’s happiness, is a function of these two components, the strength of one’s own desire modified by the relevant preference order of the competent judge. Or to put it more simply: the value of a pleasure is its quantity modified by its quality.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, § 8.



competent judge in relation to the type of pleasure involved, we get the result that, even if it is the case that pleasure is the sole constituent of happiness, not all pleasures that I experience need contribute to it. Some pleasures might yield considerably less happiness than they yield felt satisfaction to the person experiencing them. But even stronger: it does not seem altogether far-fetched to assume that there are some things wherein, for instance, the fool can take pleasure, but which would mean nothing to a competent judge. According to the somewhat Aristotelian brand of hedonism outlined here such pleasures would simply lack prudential value. Thus, while we can leave open the exact prudential contribution of the pleasures experienced by the fool, it is clear that, given the above, it is at least possible that although he is perfectly satisfied, his happiness is actually nil – a somewhat stark assessment to make of such a person's happiness, and probably quite unlikely to be true, but still a conceptual possibility.

To sum up: quality can be understood in quantitative terms, but that does not mean that there is not a difference in kind involved here, a difference between two kinds of quantity; first there is the matter of quantity of pleasure *qua* pleasure, and then there is the matter of quantity of pleasure *qua* contributor to our happiness. The qualitative dimension enters in the step from the former to the latter and the difference in kind that characterizes the preferability of certain pleasures is a matter of them involving the exercise of our higher faculties – so what we have here is a difference in kind that grounds a difference in degree.

In actuality, we might have to rely on the judgments of competent judges in order to estimate both the desirability of a pleasure and the intensity and duration and we might not always be able to factor out the

qualitative dimension. So “higher quality” might primarily be visible when we compare pleasures where we prefer the one to even very large quantities of the other.<sup>19</sup> This is however not a big problem, since what is of practical interest is the preference order, not the exact background of why competent judges prefer certain pleasures to others. Additionally, exact measurements are hardly to be expected in this area, what the theory should provide are the grounds for rough estimates that are apt enough to aid us in decision-making and this it would seem to do, even though we might have to restrict our use of the qualitative dimension to clear cases.

There might however be a more pressing worry among those on the other side of the fence, namely those drawn to perfectionist ideals about how things that are not always pleasant, like virtue, might be fitted into the picture. Not that one necessarily would share Carlyle’s vision of perfection as largely antithetical to pleasure, but how does things like moral concern fit into Mill’s account? It is to this we turn now, before rounding off with an assessment of Mill’s reconciliation between hedonism and perfectionism.

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<sup>19</sup> This might be what Mill is after in *ibid.*, Chapter 2, § 5. For a similar interpretation, see Christoph Schmidt-Petri, “Mill on Quality and Quantity”, *The Philosophical Quarterly* LIII (2003), 102-4. It is criticized by Jonathan Riley, “Interpreting Mill’s Qualitative Hedonism”, *The Philosophical Quarterly* LIII (2003), 410-8. Riley’s main criticism is that such a reading is contrary to Mill being a hedonist. I hope to show here that while it is contrary to standard hedonism (what else should one expect?), it is still a form of hedonism.

#### 4. Pleasure and the Constitution of Happiness

That happiness is *a* good is something most, if not all, people would agree on; and even if considerably fewer believe pleasure to be the sole constituent of happiness, they would probably still agree on pleasure being *a* constituent of it. Hedonists maintain a stronger position than the latter, although how much stronger depends on what we take hedonism to be a position on. It could be taken as the view that pleasure is the sole final good *simpliciter*, in which case it is an extreme form of monism, or it could be taken as the position that pleasure is the sole *prudential* good – a position that would at least seem to be a viable contender on the question of wherein the human good lies. So should Millian hedonism be understood as a global or merely as a prudential version of hedonism?

Mill himself seems to waver on this point. On the one hand, his philosophy of psychology commits him to the view that ultimately pleasure is the only thing that is desirable as an end; but, on the other hand, he is also very much aware of how there is a host of other things, virtue being something he is especially prone to take seriously, that we would seem to pursue for their own sake. And especially in the case of virtue the idea that we would pursue it merely as a means to pleasure might even seem perverse – if we pursue virtue in *that* way then does not the state of character that we might achieve lose the nobility that virtue should have? Now, in order to appreciate Mill's position on this matter, it is necessary to note that he distinguishes between two ways in which something can be

subordinated to the end of happiness, as a means and as a part respectively.<sup>20</sup> This is of course a distinction that Aristotle also draws in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The problem for Mill is however that he can hardly make the same use of the distinction as can Aristotle who would seem to understand the human good as consisting of a balanced compound of goods, a compound that might be dominated by a certain end, namely rational contemplation, but which need not be understood as being exhausted by it. While Mill and Aristotle share the view that human beings desire happiness as the ultimate end, Mill is committed to the idea that the sole constituent of happiness is pleasure.

If a Millian wants to acknowledge that things like virtue and knowledge are good, but does not want to reduce them to instrumental goods nor include them as constituents of happiness, there is no other way to go than to adopt local rather than global hedonism, *i.e.* hedonism should be understood simply as a theory about the human good. But if we have claimed that the value of those things that have real value are grounded in the preferences of competent judges (or phronimoi), then how do we, given this uniformity, draw the line between those goods that are constitutive of our happiness and those that are not? The crucial matter here is surely the way in which things are desired and the defining characteristic of goods such as virtue is that we do not desire them for the sake of the pleasure that they yield, they are not instrumental goods. Mill's adherence to psychological associationism provides him with a natural direction in which to move when trying to understand this phenomenon, the idea being

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 4, §§ 5-6.

that we can start out desiring something for the sake of pleasure and then, as we become more and more habituated into this mode of behavior, we cease to look beyond the object of this originally instrumental preference. It has become a final preference and the value of the object seems final to us as well. At root this is just a general description of a psychological phenomenon and Mill would hardly claim that just about anything could be made valuable on account of such normative near-sightedness. For instance, the miser may have come to desire money for its own sake, but money is hardly a significant part of the human good nor is it a final good in any other sense. But the miser is of course far from a competent judge: he is someone who has lost his power to appreciate things in a balanced way. Only those things that through association with pleasure would be held in the relevant kind of regard by such judges would truly be valuable. As objects of preference these things, such as virtue and knowledge, have thus been partially disconnected from the guiding principle of our economy of wanting, namely pleasure. This can serve as an explanation of why they are not to be understood as *bona fide* constituents of our good even if their goodness is grounded in our preferences: they are final objects of preference, *i.e.*, we do not desire them as means to something else, but they are not constituents of our ultimate object of desire, which according to Mill's philosophy of psychology is pleasure and pleasure alone. If we identify our happiness with our ultimate individual goals as human beings, then these other goods clearly fall to the side of the human good.

Note that since pleasure is our ultimate goal, this also means that other goods are, even when they have turned into final object of preference, still not wholly unconnected to the ultimate goal of pleasure. If things work out as they should and our preferences are reasonably well-informed and

thought through, we would not desire things like virtue simply as means to pleasure, but neither would we desire them blindly; rather what we would do is, as John Skorupski has put it, to desire even a thing like virtue “under the idea of it as pleasant.”<sup>21</sup> But would this then really capture the way that we desire virtue or knowledge? Do we really regard their values as ends as being conditioned on pleasure in this manner, albeit in this weak manner? Not that they cannot give pleasure,<sup>22</sup> but is not the pleasure that can be gotten from them grounded at least partly in an appreciation of their independent value? True as this may be, it need not be an objection to a Millian position. After all, if what really has value is fixed by the preferences of the competent judge and we assume that such a person would desire virtue, then it does not matter what I think about the matter, virtue *is* valuable even if I myself am unable to see it in a positive light. Of course, even the competent judge’s preference for virtue would still be linked to her seeing virtue under the idea of the pleasant – but the pleasure involved here, based as it is in broad and deep life-experiences, is it not of a kind that it would be far too austere to chastise just because it contributes to our good? When this idea of pleasure is not even a condition for one’s acting morally (habit will suffice for that), just something that must be the case if the will to virtue is to be integrated into one’s character so that it

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<sup>21</sup> *John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge, 1989), 298.

<sup>22</sup> In the case of virtue the issue is somewhat complex. At least certain kinds of pleasure, such as self-righteous joy, are probably incompatible with virtue; on the whole, the contentment that can be properly gotten at least from one’s own virtue is perhaps better understood as an absence of pain.

becomes a preference for virtue, is it really far-fetched to insist that it must be integrated into the economy of pleasure? Virtue might be demanding and is thus perhaps not anything that we normally associate with pleasure, but if we have come, through a rich experience of the human situation, to truly appreciate virtue, then why should virtue not please us? In the end, the question that we have to put ourselves, given that we reconstruct the Millian position in terms of the object interpretation of the preference theory is really just this: will the competent judge have a final preference for virtue and other ideal goods? If she would, then those preferences ground a final value in their objects irrespective of whether these preferences are *negatively* conditioned on an association with pleasure. For a thing to be negatively conditioned in this way means that were it to become systematically counterproductive to pleasure, it would fall out of the economy of desire; this is clearly different from the way that our preferences for instrumental goods are positively conditioned on their conduciveness to what they are instruments for.

Even if other goods are thus in a larger sense subordinated to the good of pleasure, the relation can to a certain extent also run in the other direction. As long as something stays within the economy of desire of competent judges, it gets a standing that can affect the value of those pleasures that we pursue here and now; they might have their values increased, if they have a connection to ideals and our intellectual side, or they might have their values decreased or even rubbed out, if they have a

connection to the base and lowly.<sup>23</sup> Once we have gotten an appreciation of certain things, and if we are competent judges or phronimoi this would to a great extent involve an appreciation of intellectual matters, we might then start liking better those types of pleasure that have an intellectual dimension. They will become our most cherished sources of happiness. And in this way other things than pleasure can even in a weak sense become part of happiness. Our conceptions of happiness will, if Mill is right, inevitably center on pleasure, but they can still involve discriminations between different pleasures. In this way one can make sense of Mill's insistence on how things like virtue can in a way become more than just means to happiness.<sup>24</sup> They are appropriate sources of pleasure (because they are the kind of sources in which the phronimos or competent judge would prefer to take pleasure) and as such they are in a secondary sense parts of happiness – not constitutive parts, but parts of the grounds for why certain things contribute to our happiness in the way that they do. The fact that there are these dependence relations governing the values of particular pleasures and which thus warrants us in seeing other things than pleasures as being of value is actually a welcome consequence of this Millian approach. The reason is that many instances of taking

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<sup>23</sup> Just for the record: even if formulations like this might suggest Victorian ideas about what is base and lowly, we should not assume that competent judges would be dismissive of such things as sexual enjoyment or the pleasures of food and drink; they might however most likely make discriminations among different sources of pleasure within these areas of enjoyment.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 4, § 6.



pleasure in something do in part involve judgments of quality.<sup>25</sup> The enjoyment of an excellent piece of art is difficult to separate from the appreciation of its quality: we take pleasure in the features that make it good *qua* art and if we did not see its goodness the pleasure we would take would be much lesser.

This phenomenon is not just limited to such local pleasures. For instance, Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz has emphasized the centrality of *life-satisfaction*, the general feeling that one's life is going well.<sup>26</sup> And this is clearly a feeling that is intimately tied to evaluative judgments concerning different aspects of one's life. Pleasure is the ultimate end. In Mill's philosophy of psychology it is the only thing that we desire unconditionally both in the positive and the negative sense (instrumental goods being positively conditioned and other final goods than pleasure being negatively conditioned). In order to make sense of such phenomena as life-satisfaction we needed to secure some place for other values than pleasure. And to insist on pleasure, sometimes in the form of life-satisfaction, as that which makes us happy is, given the Millian account developed here, actually fully compatible with acknowledging that we as individuals value the attainment of the non-hedonic good in question much higher than the pleasure that can be gained from its attainment. Now, if we distinguish in this way between the prudentially good and other goods, and understand that the attainment

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<sup>25</sup> Fred Feldman, *ibid.*, strongly emphasizes this aspect when he formulates his brand of "attitudinal hedonism".

<sup>26</sup> *Analysis of Happiness*, trans. Edward Rothert and Danuta Zielińska (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), Chapter 1.

of a non-hedonic good can be both good in itself and as a source of pleasure, we can thus make sense of the way in which things other than pleasure can be incorporated into one's happiness without conceptualizing happiness as an Aristotelian composite. But even if we recognize that there is in this manner a distinct alternative to be found in Mill, one that quite possibly makes as much sense of hedonism as can be made, the question does of course still remain whether it can fully capture the importance of non-hedonic components in a good human life as ably as a position like Aristotle's can. It is to this question that I will turn in the next, and final, section.

## **5. Happiness and the Importance of Ideals**

As already indicated, the non-hedonic good that is probably the most important to Mill, and certainly very important to Aristotle as well, is virtue. Both thinkers hold the intellectual dimension of a good life in very high regard. And while the Millian, as we have seen, might have to work harder in order to secure an appropriately significant part for virtue and the intellect, it might be a good idea to consider the alternative first before drawing the conclusion that the Aristotelian approach is preferable. And, in fact, although one might certainly find attractive the way that different goods are drawn together to a harmonious whole in Aristotle, one might also object to it precisely on account of the straightforwardness with which virtue is integrated into the Aristotelian picture of how we should lead our lives. The value of exercising one's intellect is one thing, but at least for some aspects of the virtues, the distinctly moral ones, the straightforward

inclusion of them into our happiness would seem to cheapen them. After all, when we act virtuously we do so for the sake of others rather than for the sake of ourselves.

This point is basically a reiteration of Prichard's well-known objection that if we reduce virtue to having to do with the attainment of personal happiness, then it is no longer a matter of true virtue,<sup>27</sup> although in fairness to someone like Aristotle it should be said that Prichard's main target was the attempt to "sell" virtue to people by appealing to their concern for themselves, and the Aristotelian would certainly insist that virtue involves a mode of thinking that precludes a preoccupation with satisfying oneself; rather, the virtuous person is understood as acting virtuously for the sake of virtue. But the fact still remains that instead of mapping the distinction between the non-moral and the moral onto the distinction between the self-regarding and the other-regarding, the Aristotelian maps it onto a distinction between crude and enlightened self-concern. We might not, once we have been habituated into virtuous behavior, think much about attaining our own happiness, but when we sit down in a cool hour of reflection and contemplate the role of virtue in our lives it is still our own good that we contemplate. The underlying rationale of virtue in Aristotle's account of the good is thus still self-regarding.

On Mill's account, however, virtue is a possible object of a final preference and although the presence of this preference in a person might be understood as a mark of enlightenment it is not a matter of enlightened

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<sup>27</sup> "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?", *Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949).

self-concern. Mill is not a psychological egoist who believes that everything we do must ultimately be traced to self-concern, but he also recognizes that to come to desire virtue as an end is an achievement rather than something that just comes naturally to us. Additionally, he is not a Humean in the sense that it is trivially true that our choices merely track our preferences; rather, Mill's view is that we can do things in spite of our preferences and thus even in spite of our desire for personal happiness or pleasure.<sup>28</sup> Yet, his understanding of the human psyche still implies that we cannot come to integrate something into the realm of choice without pleasure being in some manner associated with it. This, however, is not the same thing as reducing virtue to some form of self-regard. The potential satisfaction that lies in the life of virtue is not anything that positively conditions the desirability of virtue – all which is required is that we *can* take pleasure, preferably understood in terms of some form of life-satisfaction, in it.

Yet, while the Aristotelian account has a serious disadvantage in its handling of virtue we must be careful to distinguish between two aspects of his approach: the first is its eudaimonism, the all-embracing nature of his vision of the human good that turns morality into a mere component of one's happiness, the other is its understanding of happiness as consisting in

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<sup>28</sup> Though it should also be acknowledged that Mill does not have as robust a conception of the will as, say, Kant. For Mill there are two mainsprings of action, desire and habit, and while the latter might defeat desire *once formed*, its formation still necessarily involves desire, and thus ultimately desire for pleasure, *ibid.*, Chapter 4, § 11-12.

a balanced compound of goods. We can clearly have the second without having the first. And even if do not embrace the idea of balancing as more than a sound method of getting more happiness, we might still be pluralists about the constituents of the human good. I will not attempt here to suggest any list of such goods, but it seems clear that there are things which we pursue with an implicit awareness that the attainment of them would constitute an improvement of our lives. Indeed, while the notion of “life-satisfaction” is clearly an important one since it names a phenomenon all too often overlooked in discussions about the human good, it is also a notion that risks becoming paradoxical if we try to rely on it in the way suggested above. With respect to goods that are of the kind that they can ground such life-satisfaction, is it not reasonable to say that this satisfaction really turns on a sense of these goods as, in themselves, making our lives better in a prudential sense?

To illustrate this point we might return to the Millian example of Socrates and the fool. While the former is happier, the latter is more satisfied. Why this difference in satisfaction? Presumably because there is a difference in the ideals that they hold – or perhaps better: because one of them leads his life under the guidance of ideals while the other does not. And, of course, since Socrates would like to possess complete knowledge he is bound to be less than fully satisfied with the state that he is actually in and were he to gain full knowledge it would certainly please him. But, at least in the eyes of Socrates, it is still knowledge, not the life-satisfaction that he might feel were he to gain it, that constitutes his prudential good. A pluralist conception of the human good would enable us to better make sense of the grounds for this kind of feeling and while felt life-satisfaction is very important, it is still perhaps more natural to understand it as

something that completes the happiness that we already have on account of those things that we take such satisfaction in rather than as what essentially, together with other pleasures, constitutes happiness. In fact, although he focuses on pleasure in general rather than life-satisfaction, Aristotle has a suggestion similar to this in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he speaks about how pleasures can complete an activity, not by being a part of it, “but as a sort of consequent end, like the bloom on youths.”<sup>29</sup>

Now, I have already suggested that a Millian is capable of making sense of how a Socrates-like person can be happier than a fool even if the latter is more satisfied; but although we can, in this manner, capture something of what is involved in the superiority of the Socratic life, the Millian account might still seem to not go far enough; many of us would perhaps say that it is not merely the case that a Socratic life with only few pleasures is better than a fool’s life hoarded with pleasures – the Socratic life would be better even if it contained no pleasures at all – or that a human life would be better than an animal’s life even if it contained no pleasures at all. Such matters are of course difficult to make reasoned judgments about and, for my own part, I would certainly concede that I am not a competent judge of the kind that either Mill or Aristotle is envisaging – I am neither as

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<sup>29</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. H. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1174b31-33. In another paper I try to develop an Aristotelian approach that builds on Aristotle’s theory of pleasure and tries to give enjoyment a more prominent role as a good, in a way attempting a reconciliation between hedonism and perfectionism as well, just from the Aristotelian direction, see my “‘Like the Bloom on Youths’: How Pleasure Completes our Lives”, in Chappell, *ibid.*

educated or as experienced a judge as it would take to make this call. But even so, I still have a feeling that when I am drawn to the Socratic life, even if it were miserable, in preference over the life of the fool, even if it were idyllic, a preference for glorious failure over empty success, it is the better, and more insightful, part of me that is speaking.

What can the rationale for this kind of preference be? The question is challenging not merely because we obviously still find pleasure a very important good, but because even if we adopt a more perfectionist account we would still have to say that Socrates led a life that was essentially a failure since he never attained the knowledge that would make his life go well. And, indeed, the stoics who followed Socrates' lead in equating knowledge, virtue, and happiness were open to the possibility that there had never existed a single happy human being. Yet, even if we are drawn to perfectionist ideas, such a view is surely too austere and one of the advantages with an account that accords prudential value to more than just pleasure is that it provides much more room for us to make sense of how there can be noble failures. After all, however nice pleasure in general, or life-satisfaction in particular, might be, the fact still remains that the hedonic is not much of an ideal and the thing about ideals is that they cast a special light on the striving towards them, a light that does not fall on other kinds of striving. Thus, while a life that is spent in an unsuccessful pursuit of pleasure is just a brute failure, is it not reasonable to say that, given that knowledge is an important and attractive ideal, the life spent in pursuit of knowledge is, even if it is a failure, a life that is good in a secondary sense? It might be the case that such a life shines only with a reflected glory, but it shines nonetheless and it is the better for it. Mill himself seems to have the idea that people like Socrates have a sense of dignity which virtually

guarantees that they will be at least reasonably content with their lives.<sup>30</sup> On such a view, even a Socrates whose pursuit of knowledge were to fail would still take a certain life-satisfaction in the fact that he did at least fail in the pursuit of a worthy cause. This is surely as far as we can go if we are to stay within the bounds of perfectionist hedonism, but at least for my own part I am uncertain about whether Mill's response at this point is not simply primarily a matter of wishful thinking about human psychology.

On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that intuitions concerning the value of lives that are noble failures are difficult to interpret. Are we attracted to such lives because we find that they are prudentially good or is it perhaps in a more aesthetically inclined manner that we might appreciate them, somewhat like we can appreciate a fictional tragedy? On this question I personally remain undecided. What I hope to have shown here is just how someone like Mill could to a great extent make room for both the importance of ideals with respect to happiness and the existence of other goods than pleasure, *e.g.* virtue and knowledge. The question that remains is whether this extent is great enough. But at the very least, Mill's brand of hedonism still stands as one of the best attempts at achieving a compromise between hedonism and perfectionism and, thus, between the subjective and objective elements that can play a role in making our lives go well. What his theory was in need of in order to become a contender was a more clear way of separating the quantitative from the qualitative and the suggestion here is simply that if we understand the role of preference along the lines of the object interpretation, then we can achieve that.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, § 6.



Ultimately, however, the question of whether we should end up in a sophisticated monism *à la* Mill or a pluralism *à la* Aristotle does not just turn on our intuitions concerning certain examples. Given the basic framework adopted here and the role that the preferences of competent judges thus have for deciding what has value, the dispute between these two accounts must be settled through an investigation into philosophical anthropology, or more specifically the philosophy of human psychology; only there can we find grounds for identifying those actual people that most resemble what deserves the title of competent judges or *phronimoi*, or at least for being able to make educated guesses or approximations about what perfect examples of such judges would desire and in what way (ultimately or “merely” finally) they would do it. But that is a project which reaches far beyond the scope of this paper.