



Critique of Mill's Utilitarianism

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I propose, then, to begin by an examination of Mill's *Utilitarianism*. That is a book which contains an admirably clear and fair discussion of many ethical principles and methods. Mill exposes not a few simple mistakes which are very likely to be made by those who approach ethical problems without much previous reflection. But what I am concerned with is the mistakes which Mill himself appears to have made, and these only so far as they concern the Hedonistic principle. Let me repeat what that principle is. It is, I said, that pleasure is the only thing at which we ought to aim, the only thing that is good as an end and for its own sake. And now let us turn to Mill and see whether he accepts this description of the question at issue. "Pleasure," he says at the outset, "and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and again, at the end of his argument, "To think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences) and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing". These statements, taken together, and apart from certain confusions which are obvious in them, seem to imply the principle I have stated: and if I succeed in shewing that Mill's reasons for them do not prove them, it must at least be admitted that I have not been fighting with shadows or demolishing a man of straw.

It will be observed that Mill adds "absence of pain" to "pleasure" in his first statement, though not in his second. There is, in this, a confusion, with which, however, we need not deal. I shall talk of "pleasure" alone, for the sake of conciseness; but all my arguments will apply à fortiori to "absence of pain": it is easy to make the necessary substitutions

Mill holds, then, that "happiness is desirable, and *the only thing desirable*, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end". Happiness he has already defined as "pleasure, and the absence of pain"; he does not pretend that this is more than an arbitrary verbal definition; and, as *such*, I have not a word to say against it. His principle, then, is "pleasure is the only thing desirable," if I may be allowed, when I say "pleasure," to include in that word (so far as necessary) absence of pain. And now what are his reasons for holding that principle to be true? He has already told us that "Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof. Whatever can be proved to be good, must be so by being shewn to be a means to something *admitted to be good without proof*." With this, I

perfectly agree....Anything which is good as an end must be admitted to be good without proof. We are agreed so far....“How,” he says, “is it possible to prove that health is good?” “What proof is it possible to give that pleasure is good?” Well, in Chapter IV, in which he deals with the proof of his Utilitarian principle, Mill repeats the above statement in these words: “It has already,” he says, “been remarked, that questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptance of the term”. “Questions about ends,” he goes on in this same passage, “are, in other words, questions what things are desirable.” I am quoting these repetitions, because they make it plain what otherwise might have been doubted, that Mill is using the words “desirable” or “desirable as an end” as absolutely and precisely equivalent to the words “good as an end.” We are, then, now to hear, what reasons he advances for this doctrine that pleasure alone is good as an end.

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“Questions about ends,” he says, “are, in other words, questions about what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end. What ought to be required of this doctrine—what conditions is it requisite that the doctrine should fulfil—to make good its claim to be believed?”

“The only proof capable of being given that a thing is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being the fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as *one* of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality.”

There, that is enough. That is my first point. Mill has made as naïve and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire. “Good,” he tells us, means “desirable,” and you can only find out what is desirable by seeking to find out what is actually desired. This is, of course, only one step towards the proof of Hedonism; for it may be, as Mill goes on to say, that other things beside pleasure are desired. Whether or not pleasure is the only thing desired is, as Mill himself admits, a psychological question, to which we shall presently proceed. The important step for Ethics is this one just taken, the step which pretends to prove that “good” means “desired.”

Well, the fallacy in this step is so obvious, that it is quite wonderful how Mill failed to

see it. The fact is that “desirable” does not mean “able to be desired” as “visible” means “able to be seen.” The desirable means simply what *ought* to be desired or *deserves* to be desired; just as the detestable means not what can be but what ought to be detested and the damnable what deserves to be damned. Mill has, then, smuggled in, under cover of the word “desirable,” the very notion about which he ought to be quite clear. “Desirable” does indeed mean “what it is good to desire”; but when this is understood, it is no longer plausible to say that our only test of *that*, is what is actually desired. Is it merely a tautology when the Prayer Book talks of *good* desires? Are not *bad* desires also possible? Nay, we find Mill himself talking of a “better and nobler object of desire”, as if, after all, what is desired were not ipso facto good, and good in proportion to the amount it is desired. Moreover, if the desired is ipso facto the good; then the good is ipso facto the motive of our actions, and there can be no question of finding motives for doing it, as Mill is at such pains to do. If Mill’s explanation of “desirable” be *true*, then his statement that the rule of action may be *confounded* with the motive of it is untrue; for the motive of action will then be according to him ipso facto its rule; there can be no distinction between the two, and therefore no confusion, and thus he has contradicted himself flatly. These are specimens of the contradictions, which, as I have tried to shew, must always follow from the use of the naturalistic fallacy; and I hope I need now say no more about the matter.

Well, then, the first step by which Mill has attempted to establish his Hedonism is simply fallacious. He has attempted to establish the identity of the good with the desired, by confusing the proper sense of “desirable,” in which it denotes that which it is good to desire, with the sense which it would bear if it were analogous to such words as “visible.” If “desirable” is to be identical with “good,” then it must bear one sense; and if it is to be identical with “desired,” then it must bear quite another sense. And yet to Mill’s contention that the desired is necessarily good, it is quite essential that these two senses of “desirable” should be the same. If he holds they are the same, then he has contradicted himself elsewhere; if he holds they are not the same, then the first step in his proof of Hedonism is absolutely worthless.

But now we must deal with the second step. Having proved, as he thinks, that the good means the desired, Mill recognises that, if he is further to maintain that pleasure alone is good, he must prove that pleasure alone is really desired. This doctrine that “pleasure alone is the object of all our desires” is the doctrine which Prof. Sidgwick has called Psychological Hedonism: and it is a doctrine which most eminent psychologists are now agreed in rejecting. But it is a necessary step in the proof of any such Naturalistic Hedonism as Mill’s; and it is so commonly held, by people not expert either in psychology or in philosophy, that I wish to treat it at some length. It will be seen that Mill does not hold it in its bare form. He admits that other things than pleasure are desired; and this admission

is at once a contradiction of his Hedonism. One of the shifts by which he seeks to evade this contradiction we shall afterwards consider. But some may think that no such shifts are needed: they may say of Mill, what Callicles says of Polus in the *Gorgias*, that he has made the fatal admission through a most unworthy fear of appearing paradoxical; that they, on the other hand, will have the courage of their convictions, and will not be ashamed to go to any lengths of paradox, in defence of what they hold to be the truth.

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Well, then, we are supposing it held that pleasure is the object of all desire, that it is the universal end of all human activity. Now I suppose it will not be denied that people are commonly said to desire other things: for instance, we usually talk of desiring food and drink, of desiring money, approbation, fame. The question, then, must be of what is meant by desire, and by the object of desire. There is obviously asserted some sort of necessary or universal relation between something which is called desire, and another thing which is called pleasure. The question is of what sort this relation is; whether in conjunction with the naturalistic fallacy above mentioned, it will justify Hedonism. Now I am not prepared to deny that there is some universal relation between pleasure and desire; but I hope to shew, that, if there is, it is of such sort as will rather make against than for Hedonism. It is urged that pleasure is always the object of desire, and I am ready to admit that pleasure is always, in part at least, the *cause* of desire. But this distinction is very important. Both views might be expressed in the same language; both might be said to hold that whenever we desire, we always desire *because of* some pleasure: if I asked my supposed Hedonist, “Why do you desire that?” he might answer, quite consistently with his contention, “Because there is pleasure there,” and if he asked me the same question, I might answer, equally consistently with my contention, “Because there is pleasure here.” Only our two answers would not mean the same thing. It is this use of the same language to denote quite different facts, which I believe to be the chief cause why Psychological Hedonism is so often held, just as it was also the cause of Mill’s naturalistic fallacy.

Let us try to analyze the psychological state which is called “desire.” That name is usually confined to a state of mind in which the idea of some object or event, not yet existing, is present to us. Suppose, for instance, I am desiring a glass of port wine. I have the idea of drinking such a glass before my mind, although I am not yet drinking it. Well, how does pleasure enter in to this relation? My theory is that it enters in, in this way. The *idea* of the drinking causes a feeling of pleasure in my mind, which helps to produce that state of incipient activity, which is called “desire.” It is, therefore, because of a pleasure, which I already have—the pleasure excited by a mere idea—that I desire the wine, which I have not. And I am ready to admit that a pleasure of this kind, an actual pleasure, is always among the causes of every desire, and not only of every desire, but of every mental activity, whether conscious or sub-conscious. I am ready to *admit* this, I say: I cannot vouch that it

s the true psychological doctrine; but, at all events, it is not *primâ facie* quite absurd. And now, what is the other doctrine, the doctrine which I am supposing held, and which is at all events essential to Mill's argument? It is this. That when I desire the wine, it is not the wine which I desire but the pleasure which I expect to get from it. In other words, the doctrine is that the idea of a pleasure *not actual* is always necessary to cause desire. It is these two different theories which I suppose the Psychological Hedonists to confuse: the confusion is, as Mr Bradley puts it, between "a pleasant thought" and "the thought of a pleasure." It is in fact only where the latter, the "thought of a pleasure," is present, that pleasure can be said to be the *object* of desire, or the *motive* to action. On the other hand, when only a pleasant thought is present, as, I admit, *may* always be the case, then it is the object of the thought—that which we are thinking about—which is the object of desire and the motive to action; and the pleasure, which that thought excites, may, indeed, cause our desire or move us to action, but it is not our end or object nor our motive.

Well, I hope this distinction is sufficiently clear. Now let us see how it bears upon Ethical Hedonism. I assume it to be perfectly obvious that the idea of the object of desire is not always and only the idea of a pleasure. In the first place, plainly, we are not always conscious of expecting pleasure, when we desire a thing. We may be only conscious of the thing which we desire, and may be impelled to make for it at once, without any calculation as to whether it will bring us pleasure or pain. And, in the second place, even when we do expect pleasure, it can certainly be very rarely pleasure *only* which we desire. For instance, granted that, when I desire my glass of port wine, I have also an idea of the pleasure I expect from it, plainly that pleasure cannot be the only object of my desire; the port wine must be included in my object, else I might be led by my desire to take wormwood instead of wine. If the desire were directed *solely* towards the pleasure, it could not lead me to take the wine; if it is to take a definite direction, it is absolutely necessary that the idea of the object, from which the pleasure is expected, should also be present and should control my activity. The theory then that what is desired is always and only pleasure must break down: it is impossible to prove that pleasure alone is good, by that line of argument. But, if we substitute for this theory, that other, possibly true, theory, that pleasure is always the cause of desire, then all the plausibility of our ethical doctrine that pleasure alone is good straightaway disappears. For in this case, pleasure is not what I desire, it is not what I want: it is something which I already have, before I can want anything. And can any one feel inclined to maintain, that that which I already have, while I am still desiring something else, is always and alone the good?

But now let us return to consider another of Mill's arguments for his position that "happiness is the sole end of human action." Mill admits, as I have said, that pleasure is not the only thing we actually desire. "The desire of virtue," he says, "is not as universal, but is as

authentic a fact, as the desire of happiness.” And again, “Money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself.” These admissions are, of course, in naked and glaring contradiction with his argument that pleasure is the only thing desirable, because it is the only thing desired. How then does Mill even attempt to avoid this contradiction? His chief argument seems to be that “virtue,” “money” and other such objects, when they are thus desired in and for themselves, are desired only as “a part of happiness.” Now what does this mean? Happiness, as we saw, has been defined by Mill, as “pleasure and the absence of pain.” Does Mill mean to say that “money,” these actual coins, which he admits to be desired in and for themselves, are a part either of pleasure or of the absence of pain? Will he maintain that those coins themselves are in my mind, and actually a part of my pleasant feelings? If this is to be said, all words are useless: nothing can possibly be distinguished from anything else; if these two things are not distinct, what on earth is? We shall hear next that this table is really and truly the same thing as this room; that a cab-horse is in fact indistinguishable from St Paul’s Cathedral; that this book of Mill’s which I hold in my hand, because it was his pleasure to produce it, is now and at this moment a part of the happiness which he felt many years ago and which has so long ceased to be. Pray consider a moment what this contemptible nonsense really means. “Money,” says Mill, “is only desirable as a means to happiness.” Perhaps so, but what then? “Why,” says Mill, “money is undoubtedly desired for its own sake.” “Yes, go on,” say we. “Well,” says Mill, “if money is desired for its own sake, it must be desirable as an end-in-itself: I have said so myself.” “Oh,” say we, “but you have also said just now that it was only desirable as a means.” “I own I did,” says Mill, “but I will try to patch up matters, by saying that what is only a means to an end, is the same thing as a part of that end. I daresay the public won’t notice.” And the public haven’t noticed. Yet this is certainly what Mill has done. He has broken down the distinction between means and ends, upon the precise observance of which his Hedonism rests. And he has been compelled to do this, because he failed to distinguish “end” in the sense of what is desirable, from “end” in the sense of what is desired: a distinction which, nevertheless, both the present argument and his whole book presupposes. This is a consequence of the naturalistic fallacy.

Mill, then, has nothing better to say for himself than this. His two fundamental propositions are, in his own words, “that to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences), and to think of it as pleasant, are one and the same thing; and that desire anything except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.” Both of these statements are, we have seen, merely supported by fallacies. The first seems to rest on the naturalistic fallacy; the second rests partly on this, partly on the fallacy of confusing ends and means, and partly on the fallacy of confusing a pleasant thought with the thought of a pleasure. His very language shews this. For that the idea of

a thing is pleasant, in his second clause, is obviously meant to be the same fact which he denotes by “thinking of it as pleasant,” in his first.

Accordingly, Mill’s arguments for the proposition that pleasure is the sole good, and our refutation of those arguments, may be summed up as follows:

First of all, he takes “the desirable,” which he uses as a synonym for “the good,” to *mean* what *can* be desired. The test, again, of what can be desired, is, according to him, what actually is desired: if, therefore, he says, we can find some one thing which is always and alone desired, that thing will necessarily be the only thing that is desirable, the only thing that is good as an end. In this argument the naturalistic fallacy is plainly involved. That fallacy, I explained, consists in the contention that good *means* nothing but some simple or complex notion, that can be defined in terms of natural qualities. In Mill’s case, good is thus supposed to *mean* simply what is desired; and what is desired is something which can thus be defined in natural terms. Mill tells us that we ought to desire something (an ethical proposition), because we actually do desire it; but if his contention that “I ought to desire” means nothing but “I do desire” were true, then he is only entitled to say, “We do desire so and so, because we do desire it”; and that is not an ethical proposition at all; it is a mere tautology. The whole object of Mill’s book is to help us to discover what we ought to do; but in fact, by attempting to define the meaning of this “ought,” he has completely debarred himself from ever fulfilling that object: he has confined himself to telling us what we do do.

Mill’s first argument then is that, because good means desired, therefore the desired is good; but having thus arrived at an ethical conclusion, by denying that any ethical conclusion is possible, he still needs another argument to make his conclusion a basis for Hedonism. He has to prove that we always do desire pleasure or freedom from pain, and that we never desire anything else whatever. This second doctrine, which Professor Sidgwick has called Psychological Hedonism, I accordingly discussed. I pointed out how obviously untrue it is that we never desire anything but pleasure; and how there is not a shadow of ground for saying even that, whenever we desire anything, we always desire pleasure *as well as* that thing. I attributed the obstinate belief in these untruths partly to a confusion between the cause of desire and the object of desire. It may, I said, be true that desire can never occur unless it be preceded by some *actual* pleasure; but even if this is true, it obviously gives no ground for saying that the object of desire is always some *future* pleasure. By the object of desire is meant that, of which the idea causes desire in us; it is some pleasure, which we anticipate, some pleasure which we have not got, which is the object of desire, whenever we do desire pleasure. And any actual pleasure, which may be excited by the idea of this anticipated pleasure, is obviously not the same pleasure as that anticipated pleasure, of which only the idea is actual. This actual pleasure is not what we want; what we want is always something which we have not got; and to say that pleasure always causes us to want is quite a different thing from saying that what we want is always pleasure.

Finally, we saw, Mill admits all this. He insists that we do *actually* desire other things

than pleasure, and yet he says we do *really* desire nothing else. He tries to explain away this contradiction, by confusing together two notions, which he has before carefully distinguished—the notions of means and of end. He now says that a means to an end is the same thing as a part of that end. To this last fallacy special attention should be given, as our ultimate decision with regard to Hedonism will largely turn upon it.

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It is this ultimate decision with regard to Hedonism at which we must now try to arrive. So far I have been only occupied with refuting Mill's naturalistic arguments for Hedonism; but the doctrine that pleasure alone is desirable may still be true, although Mill's fallacies cannot prove it so. This is the question which we have now to face. This proposition, "pleasure alone is good or desirable," belongs undoubtedly to that class of propositions, to which Mill at first rightly pretended it belonged, the class of first principles, which are not amenable to direct proof. But in this case, as he also rightly says, "considerations may be presented capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine". It is such considerations that Professor Sidgwick presents, and such also that I shall try to present for the opposite view. This proposition that "pleasure alone is good as an end," the fundamental proposition of Ethical Hedonism, will then appear, in Professor Sidgwick's language, as an object of intuition. I shall try to shew you why my intuition denies it, just as his intuition affirms it. It *may* always be true notwithstanding; neither intuition can *prove* whether it is true or not; I am bound to be satisfied, if I can "present considerations capable of determining the intellect" to reject it.

Now it may be said that this is a very unsatisfactory state of things. It is indeed; but it is important to make a distinction between two different reasons, which may be given for calling it unsatisfactory. Is it unsatisfactory because our principle cannot be proved? or is it unsatisfactory merely because we do not agree with one another about it? I am inclined to think that the latter is the chief reason. For the mere fact that in certain cases proof is impossible does not usually give us the least uneasiness. For instance, nobody can prove that there is a chair beside me; yet I do not suppose that any one is much dissatisfied for that reason. We all agree that it is a chair, and that is enough to content us, although it is quite possible we may be wrong. A madman, of course, might come in and say that it is not a chair but an elephant. We could not prove that he was wrong, and the fact that he did not agree with us might then begin to make us uneasy. Much more, then, shall we be uneasy, if some one, whom we do not think to be mad, disagrees with us. We shall try to argue with him, and we shall probably be content if we lead him to agree with us, although we shall not have proved our point. We can only persuade him by shewing him that our view is consistent with something else which he holds to be true, whereas his original view is contradictory to it. But it will be impossible to prove that that something else, which we both agree to be true, is really so; we shall be satisfied to have settled the matter in dispute

by means of it, merely because we are agreed on it. In short, our dissatisfaction in these cases is almost always of the type felt by the poor lunatic in the story. "I said the world was mad," says he, "and the world said that I was mad; and, confound it, they outvoted me." It is, I say, almost always such a disagreement, and not the impossibility of proof, which makes us call the state of things unsatisfactory. For, indeed, who can prove that proof itself is a warrant of truth? We are all agreed that the laws of logic are true and therefore we accept a result which is proved by their means; but such a proof is satisfactory to us only because we are all so fully agreed that it is a warrant of truth. And yet we cannot, by the nature of the case, prove that we are right in being so agreed.

Accordingly, I do not think we need be much distressed by our admission that we cannot prove whether pleasure alone is good or not. We may be able to arrive at an agreement notwithstanding; and if so, I think it will be satisfactory. And yet I am not very sanguine about our prospects of such satisfaction. Ethics, and philosophy in general, have always been in a peculiarly unsatisfactory state. There has been no agreement about them, as there is about the existence of chairs and lights and benches. I should therefore be a fool if I hoped to settle one great point of controversy, now and once for all. It is extremely improbable I shall convince. It would be highly presumptuous even to hope that in the end, say two or three centuries hence, it will be agreed that pleasure is not the sole good. Philosophical questions are so difficult, the problems they raise are so complex, that no one can fairly expect, now, any more than in the past, to win more than a very limited assent. And yet I confess that the considerations which I am about to present appear to me to be absolutely convincing. I do think that they *ought* to convince, if only I can put them well. In any case, I can but try. I *shall* try now to put an end to that unsatisfactory state of things, of which I have been speaking. I shall try to produce an agreement that the fundamental principle of Hedonism is very like an absurdity, by shewing what it must mean, if it is clearly thought out, and how that clear meaning is in conflict with other beliefs, which will, I hope, not be so easily given up.

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Well, then, we now proceed to discuss Intuitionistic Hedonism. And the beginning of this discussion marks, it is to be observed, a turning-point in my ethical method. The point I have been labouring hitherto, the point that "good is indefinable," and that to deny this involves a fallacy, is a point capable of strict proof: for to deny it involves contradictions. But now we are coming to the question, for the sake of answering which Ethics exists, the question what things or qualities are good. Of any answer to *this* question no direct proof is possible, and that, just because of our former answer, as to the meaning of good, direct proof *was* possible. We are now confined to the hope of what Mill calls "indirect proof," the hope of determining one another's intellect; and we are now so confined, just because, in the matter of the former question we are not so confined. Here, then, is an intuition to

be submitted to our verdict—the intuition that “pleasure alone is good as an end—good in and for itself.”

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Well, in this connection, it seems first desirable to touch on another doctrine of Mill’s—another doctrine which, in the interest of Hedonism, Professor Sidgwick has done very wisely to reject. This is the doctrine of “difference of quality in pleasures.” “If I am asked,” says Mill, “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, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. 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.”

Now it is well known that Bentham rested his case for Hedonism on “quantity of pleasure” alone. It was his maxim, that “quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry.” And Mill apparently considers Bentham to have proved that nevertheless poetry is better than pushpin; that poetry does produce a greater quantity of pleasure. But yet, says, the Utilitarians “might have taken the other and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency”. Now we see from this that Mill acknowledges “quality of pleasure” to be another or different ground for estimating pleasures, than Bentham’s quantity; and moreover, by that question-begging “higher,” which he afterwards translates into “superior,” he seems to betray an uncomfortable feeling, that, after all, if you take quantity of pleasure for your only standard, something may be wrong and you may deserve to be called a pig. And it may presently appear that you very likely would deserve this name. But, meanwhile, I only wish to shew that Mill’s admissions as to the quality of pleasure are either inconsistent with his Hedonism, or else afford no other ground for it than would be given by mere quantity of pleasure.

It will be seen that Mill’s test for one pleasure’s superiority in quality over another is the preference of most people who have experienced both. A pleasure so preferred, he holds, is more desirable. But then, as we have seen, he holds that “to think of an object as desirable and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing”. He holds, therefore, that the preference of experts merely proves that one pleasure is pleasanter than another. But if that is so, how can he distinguish this standard from the standard of quantity of pleasure? Can one pleasure be pleasanter than another, except in the sense that it gives *more* pleasure? “Pleasant” must, if words are to have any meaning at all, denote some one quality common to all things that are pleasant; and, if so, then one thing can only be more pleasant than another, according as it has more or less of this one quality. But, then, let us try the other alternative, and suppose that Mill does not

seriously mean that this preference of experts merely proves one pleasure to be pleasanter than another. Well, in this case, what does “preferred” mean? It cannot mean “more desired,” since, as we know, the degree of desire is always, according to Mill, in exact proportion to the degree of pleasantness. But, in that case, the basis of Mill’s Hedonism collapses, for he is admitting that one thing may be preferred over another, and thus proved more desirable, although it is not more desired. In this case, Mill’s judgment of preference is just a judgment of that intuitional kind which I have been contending to be necessary to establish the hedonistic or any other principle. It is a direct judgment that one thing is more desirable, or better than another; a judgment utterly independent of all considerations as to whether one thing is more desired or pleasanter than another. This is to admit that good is good and indefinable.

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And note another point that is brought out by this discussion. Mill’s judgment of preference, so far from establishing the principle that pleasure alone is good, is obviously inconsistent with it. He admits that experts can judge whether one pleasure is more desirable than another, because pleasures differ in quality. But what does this mean? If one pleasure can differ from another in quality, that means, that *a* pleasure is something complex, something composed, in fact, of pleasure *in addition to* that which produces pleasure. For instance, Mill speaks of “sensual indulgences” as “lower pleasures.” But what is a sensual indulgence? It is surely a certain excitement of some sense *together with* the pleasure caused by such excitement. Mill, therefore, in admitting that a sensual indulgence can be directly judged to be lower than another pleasure, in which the degree of pleasure involved may be the same, is admitting that other things may be good, or bad, quite independently of the pleasure which accompanies them. *A* pleasure is, in fact, merely a misleading term which conceals the fact that what we are dealing with is not pleasure but something else, which may indeed necessarily produce pleasure, but is nevertheless quite distinct from it.

Mill, therefore, in thinking that to estimate quality of pleasure is quite consistent with his hedonistic principle that pleasure and absence of pain alone are desirable as ends has again committed the fallacy of confusing ends and means. For take even the most favourable supposition of his meaning; let us suppose that by a pleasure he does not mean, as his words imply, that which produces pleasure and the pleasure produced. Let us suppose him to mean that there are various kinds of pleasure, in the sense in which there are various kinds of colour—blue, red, green, etc. Even in this case, if we are to say that our end is colour alone, then, although it is impossible we should have colour without having some particular colour, yet the particular colour we must have, is only a *means* to our having colour, if colour is really our end. And if colour is our only possible end, as Mill says pleasure is, then there can be no possible reason for preferring one colour to another, red, for instance, to blue, except that the one is more of a colour than the other. Yet the opposite of this is what Mill is attempting to hold with regard to pleasures.

Accordingly a consideration of Mill's view that some pleasures are superior to others *in quality* brings out one point which may "help to determine the intellect" with regard to the intuition "Pleasure is the only good." For it brings out the fact that if you say "pleasure," you must mean "pleasure": you must mean some one thing common to all different "pleasures," some one thing, which may exist in different degrees, but which cannot differ in *kind*. I have pointed out that, if you say, as Mill does, that quality of pleasure is to be taken into account, then you are no longer holding that pleasure *alone* is good as an end, since you imply that something else, something which is *not* present in all pleasures, is *also* good as an end. The illustration I have given from colour expresses this point in its most acute form. It is plain that if you say "Colour alone is good as an end," then you can give no possible reason for preferring one colour to another. Your only standard of good and bad will then be "colour"; and since red and blue both conform equally to this, the only standard, you can have no other whereby to judge whether red is better than blue. It is true that you cannot have colour unless you also have one or all of the particular colours: they, therefore, if colour is the end, will all be good as means, but none of them can be better than another even as a means, far less can any one of them be regarded as an end in itself. Just so with pleasure: If we do really mean "Pleasure alone is good as an end," then we must agree with Bentham that "Quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry." To have thus dismissed Mill's reference to quality of pleasure, is therefore to have made one step in the desired direction. The reader will now no longer be prevented from agreeing with me, by any idea that the hedonistic principle "Pleasure alone is good as an end" is consistent with the view that one pleasure may be of a better quality than another. These two views, we have seen, are contradictory to one another. We must choose between them: and if we choose the latter, then we must give up the principle of Hedonism.

G.E. Moore. *Principia Ethica*. Chapter 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.

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