From competing principles to competing pleasures: Out of the frying pan…

By Steve Bow

> It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides. (Mill, 1879, p. 15).

The above quote from J.S. Mill's seminal work "Utilitarianism" captures the essence of his view on the distinction of higher and lower pleasures and their divergent value. This essay explores the implications of this proposition, especially in the context of the stated goal of Mill's work, which is to describe the single unifying principle that underlies all other moral reasoning. I will argue that the introduction of different types of pleasure either undermines this objective, or requires that the Greatest Happiness Principle be supplemented by another principle to decide between conflicting types of pleasure.

One approach to ethics has been to identify a number of self-evident principles thought to reflect the moral dimensions of actions, principles such as justice, fidelity or non-maleficence. However, it is acknowledged even by its proponents that, assuming a closed list of principles could be agreed, this approach becomes problematic when two or more principles come into conflict, a situation often referred to as a moral dilemma. An example would be the conflict between the principles of beneficence and fidelity when intervening to prevent a serious accident would mean breaking a promise to meet a friend (Ross, 2007). Following one principle would violate the other, so which is the right choice? Attempts to resolve such conflicts either depend on "weighing the case" in a relatively undefined manner, giving the principles an order or weighting, or introducing a rule so that one principle could always be found to take priority in a given situation. However, such judgements, meta-principles or rules rarely appear to be as self-evident as the principles between which they are intended to arbitrate.

Mill begins by highlighting the inadequacy of this state of affairs, arguing that "…there should be a determinate order of precedence among [principles]; and the one principle, or the rule for deciding between the various principles when they conflict, ought to be self-evident" (Mill, 1879, p. 4). Mill goes on to argue that utilitarianism is superior to these multiple principle based approaches as it gives "one first principle, or common ground of obligation" (Mill, 1879, p. 4) - the Greatest Happiness Principle. This he defines as holding "that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure" (Mill, 1879, p. 11).

Mill is quite clear on the implication of this principle: "pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things… are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain" (Mill, 1879, p. 11). In other words, nothing has moral value that does not ultimately resolve to the presence or absence of pleasure or pain.

Mill goes on to argue that there are not just different *causes* of pleasure, but different *kinds* of pleasure and that "some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others" (Mill, 1879, p. 13). Although he does not give a comprehensive list of kinds of pleasure, he consistently refers to "higher" and "lower" pleasures. The manner in which Mill uses this distinction appears to indicate that he envisages a continuum of pleasures, rather than a binary division between, for example, mental and physical pleasures. It seems fairly clear that he believes there is an indefinite

number of different kinds of pleasure, all of which vary in value. In addition, he argues that the discrepancy in value of different kinds of pleasure could be readily and reliably identified by any persons who have experience of them (assuming that these persons are capable of appreciating and enjoying them).

This proposition chimes with the common-sense principle of "quality, not quantity", and also extricates utilitarianism from the difficulties arising from treating all pleasure as equally valuable (such as the implication that, to the degree that they have an equivalent ability to experience pleasure, animals have the same moral status as humans).

Nevertheless, this comes at a heavy cost to the simplicity of the utilitarian theory. Mill's objective was to show that utilitarianism does away with moral dilemmas by giving a single principle of moral obligation. In introducing the idea of multiple distinct kinds of pleasure of varying value, Mill loses his "one first principle". The moral dilemma is simply transposed from a conflict of principles to a conflict of pleasures.

This is easily demonstrated by imagining you have to choose between sending one person to the theatre or giving five people full body massages. The pleasure attained at the theatre is surely one of the higher pleasures, whilst the enjoyment of the massage is surely one of the lower. Just as when trading off principles, we have to decide which pleasures are to win out. And just as with trading off principles, it is not obviously clear how they should be weighted and ordered. Is a higher pleasure worth, say, twice as much as a lower pleasure, or is it always triumphant, such that even only a minute gain in higher pleasure trumps a huge gain in lower pleasure? Incidentally, Mill seems to favour the latter position[1], but, either way, the resolution of conflicting pleasures becomes the new focus of attention. And it is certainly not clear that being left with conflicting pleasures is any more satisfactory a state of affairs than being left with conflicting principles.

There is a further, and perhaps more significant difficulty that acknowledging multiple kinds of pleasure introduces. It seems inescapable that, whatever it is that distinguishes *kinds* of pleasure from each other, it cannot be pleasure. There must be some characteristic other than pleasure that distinguishes the higher from the lower pleasures and gives the former more value than the latter. This would entail that there is, in addition to pleasure, something else that has moral value in itself. Although Mill refrains from pursuing this logic so far, he himself suggests that "dignity" may be an appropriate name for this other characteristic of value. However, he does not expand on this in detail, so it is not clear exactly what is meant, and it is not developed into a working principle.

Regardless of its name, the existence of this other characteristic of value is significant, as it means that the Greatest Happiness Principle, which only recognises the value of pleasure, would have to be supplemented by a *second* first principle. In fact, since this new principle would sit atop the Greatest Happiness Principle, arbitrating between different pleasures, it could be argued that this ought to be considered the single first principle, with the Greatest Happiness Principle demoted to the status of a subsidiary or derivative secondary principle. Likewise, pleasure would sit subordinate in value to dignity, or whatever it is we conclude distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures. It hardly needs to be stated that this would require a radical reworking of the utilitarian theory.

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1 "If one of the two [pleasures] is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account" (Mill, 1879, p. 13)

Thus, by acknowledging that different kinds of pleasure have different moral value, on the one hand, Mill rescues utilitarianism from the awkward implications of a monomaniacal pursuit of any and all pleasure, but, on the other, he loses the one unifying principle that can be relied upon to unequivocally resolve any moral decision. That is, he loses the one thing he was touting in utilitarianism's favour at the start. Of course, that is not to say that Mill is not correct in distinguishing in value different kinds of pleasure. If he is, though, it demands that the theory of utilitarianism be substantially reformulated, in order to accommodate the implications which I have attempted to outline in this essay.

References

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