I. Introduction: Hedonism, Sensory Hedonism, and the Higher Pleasures Doctrine

The idea that what makes a person’s life good is the amount of pleasure experienced by that person has a long and controversial history. Hedonism is the thesis that pleasure and only pleasure is what makes a life good. In slightly more technical language, hedonism is the thesis that pleasure is the sole positive determiner of intrinsic value.\(^1\) According to hedonism, things other than pleasure can be valuable. The value those things have owes to the fact that they are conducive to pleasure. For example, it is consistent with hedonism that a university education is valuable, so long as that education is instrumental in producing pleasure. For that reason, we understand hedonism as a thesis about what determines intrinsic value, while allowing that many things may be instrumentally valuable. Something is instrumentally valuable if it is valuable just because it leads to something else that is valuable; and something is intrinsically valuable if the value it has is not because of its relation to something else valuable.\(^2\)

Why would anyone accept hedonism? Consider Jones. Jones has a successful career, drives a respectable but not-too-flashy car, and has a very close family. But Jones is completely miserable. Jones cares little for those possessions and relationships, and suffers from an ailment that causes near-constant pain. Now consider Smith. Smith is exactly like Jones except that Smith is extremely happy: Smith takes great pleasure in those possessions and relationships and is in perfect health. Smith is well-off, and Jones is not. But the only difference between their

\(^1\) Conversely, pain is the only negative determiner of intrinsic value. Typically, philosophers think of pain and pleasure as opposites on a scale, so the qualification ‘and pain is the only negative determiner’ is usually not added to definitions of hedonism.

\(^2\) An example: many people think a university education is valuable. Many of those people think education is valuable because it leads to better jobs than would otherwise be available without an education. Even if we disagree with the empirical claim that an education always leads to better employment or with the value claim that what makes an education valuable is just that it leads to a job, we clearly see the intrinsic/instrumental distinction illustrated in this sort of reasoning.
lives concerns the pleasure each experiences. So, the things of value that each has—close relationships, a successful career, and material well-being—is valuable only insofar as they lead to pleasure. And that, finally, means pleasure is the only determiner of intrinsic value.

Clear commitments to the idea that life is good to the degree that it is pleasurable go back as far as Epicurus (341-270 B.C.E.) It would be a mistake, though, to attribute to Epicurus the view that whatever makes one feel good is good for one. Indeed, while in contemporary English we call a person “epicurean” who indulges in fine good and drink, that view is nowhere to be found in Epicurus. Indeed, he held nearly the complete opposite:

[S]imple flavors provide a pleasure equal to that of an extravagant lifestyle…barley cakes and water provide the highest pleasure when someone in want takes them (Letter to Menoeceus 130-131).

Similarly,

[W]hen we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe, either from ignorance and disagreement or from deliberate misinterpretation, but rather from the lack of pain in the body and disturbance of the soul (Letter to Menoeceus 131).

We would not normally call someone a hedonist who sought after nothing but quiet contentment. Surely, though, we should not conclude that Epicurus was not a hedonist due to his views about what is pleasing any more than we should conclude that Epicurus was not an epicurean because of his stance on fine dining. Rather, what we have discovered is that hedonism is open to multiple understandings of what is pleasing. So Epicurus and John Bonham\(^3\) can both be hedonists while Epicurus recommends abstinence from everything that might create undue desire and Bonham seeks pleasure from any source, be it sex, drugs, fame, or whatever.

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\(^3\) John Bonham was the famous drummer of Led Zeppelin whose behavior clearly exemplified the pursuit of ‘sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll.’
Many philosophers, perhaps Epicurus but most importantly John Stuart Mill, think some pleasures are simply better than others.\(^4\) ‘Surely,’ those of Mill’s persuasion think, ‘the pleasures obtainable by beasts—consumption of drugs and alcohol, sexual gratification, mild overeating—are worse than the pleasures obtainable by rational beings such as ourselves.’ We are fit for higher things: the enjoyment of symphonies, sophisticated conversation with others of like mind, the contemplation of mathematics and (of course!) philosophical matters. Lower animals cannot enjoy these things. Only we can. Those of the Millian persuasion think the pleasure of fine wine and sophisticated conversation is better than the pleasure of gorging oneself on French fries and sitcom reruns, so the thought goes. The Millian view is not obviously wrong. Many people think there is something better about seeing a play than watching reality television, even while taking pleasure in both. We cannot disparage the Millan view for being elitist while being elitists ourselves.

*Sensory hedonism* is a form of hedonism according to which what makes one pleasure better than another pleasure is solely a function of how pleasant the better pleasure is.\(^5\) The *higher pleasures doctrine* is the Millian thesis just sketched: there are some pleasures that are in and of themselves of better quality than others. In this paper, I argue that one cannot hold to both sensory hedonism and the higher pleasures doctrine.

\(^4\) Historically, most interpreters have read Mill as a hedonist. Not all interpreters agree, e.g. Brink (2013) ch. 3. This paper is not an exercise in Mill interpretation. I am interested in the question of whether two philosophical theses are compatible, both of which were plausibly held by Mill on a traditional interpretation. I think Mill did not have a single conception of intrinsic value. I think he was undecided. Within the body of *Utilitarianism* alone, he seems to endorse both sensory hedonism (II:2) and perfectionism (IV:5). There has been plenty of debate about how to reconcile his various remarks, but I think all such attempts are doomed to fail because they require not taking Mill at his plain word. Once that is the case, it is hard to call what one is doing “interpretation” rather than “reconstruction” or “revision”. Partly for that reason, I remain agnostic on the particulars of Mill interpretation in favor of philosophical analysis of his apparent commitments.

\(^5\) This is not the same as how we defined hedonism above. It is possible to accept hedonism—the view that pleasure is the one and only determiner of intrinsic value—while rejecting sensory hedonism. Here is how: pleasure is the one and only determiner of intrinsic value, but how valuable a pleasure is depends on factors other than how pleasant the pleasure is.
II. Mill’s Quantity/Quality Distinction and the Higher Pleasures Doctrine

Mill claimed that pleasures were separable into different “qualities” on the basis of perceived differences in feel and pleasantness. Mill notoriously appealed to the preference of competent judges⁶ to determine the quality of a pleasure:

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 completely 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 (II.5).⁷

According to this passage, Mill thought that not everyone’s preference for one pleasure over another is evidence that the former is of higher quality than the latter: only the preferences of those who have experience of both, or, again in his words, are completely acquainted with both, are in a position to judge one pleasure as better than another. Mill also has a second requirement concerning the judges. Not only do the competent judges have the requisite experiences, but their decisions are not to be motivated by “any feeling of moral obligation” to prefer the one pleasure over the other. Although it is not explicit in the passage, it seems that Mill means that nothing besides the pleasantness of the two competing pleasures is to be judged.⁸ By this test,

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⁶ Serious interpretive difficulties surround the identity of the competent judges. Mill says very little about who they are. Very different conceptions of value arise depending on who the judges are. For example, if the judges are real-world human beings with the sorts of experiences Mill requires in (II.5), then it is possible for some pleasure X to be better than pleasure Y according to the current judges, but for some change in tastes among the judges, or a change in judge demographics, to yield a contrary decision of Y over X in the future. Alternatively, if the judges are hypothetical ideal judges, such a change of preference is not likely, but it is then mysterious how they could disagree, which is a possibility left open by Mill when he allows that the agreement only of “almost all” of the judges is sufficient to indicate that one pleasure is superior to another. Other readings are possible, and none are unproblematic.

⁷ All references to Mill’s *Utilitarianism* are given by citing chapter and paragraph. So, (II.5) means “chapter 2, paragraph 5”.

⁸ For example, it seems that that shame is not always caused by moral wrongdoing, or even by perceived moral wrongdoing. But someone judging one pleasure as more pleasant than another might be motivated by shame to claim to prefer one experience rather than another, irrespective of one’s moral judgments concerning the act in
when a pleasure is preferred by “all or almost all” of the competent judges on account of its perceived pleasantness alone, that pleasure is higher quality than the other.

Mill’s higher pleasures doctrine has been a source of much discussion, most of it negative. The problem concerns the use to which Mill put the preference of the competent judges, namely, that of adjudicating between pleasures on account of something other than their pleasantness. The competent judges should, by Mill’s standards, only be making assessments of relative pleasantness. The problem, as Mill’s critics see it, arises when Mill draws conclusions about the quality of the pleasures themselves on the basis of the judge’s preferences, where quality is assumed to be independent of the degree (“quantity”) of pleasantness. Mill writes,

> From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final (II.8).

It is clear in this passage that Mill is using the competent judges to tell us which pleasures are categorically better than others. What the competent judges say goes. These remarks suggest what is valuable about a pleasure is not only determined by its pleasantness but also by its quality. If I am not a competent judge, and I prefer fries and reruns to literature, so much the question. (I am confident the reader can imagine a variety of experiences more pleasurable than reading a dull book, which, while not immoral, are things which one would not quickly admit to preferring over the book.) I think the spirit of Mill’s remarks suggests that judges influenced by anything other than the perceived pleasantness of a given pleasure are not judging the way they ought to for the experiment.

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10 There is some controversy concerning whether the competent judges are infallible. David Brink argues against an infallibilist reading of the judges. He argues the judges’ preferences are merely evidence of what is intrinsically value (2013, p. 57). He contrasts his “evidential” reading of the judges with a “constitutive” reading of the judges. The latter claims that the judges’ preferences are constitutive of value. Brink is mistaken in thinking that an evidential reading blunts the infallibilist claim. Even if the judges are just reporting about what is good rather than defining it, Mill’s claim is that the judges’ preferences must be “admitted as final”. So, the judges (plural) are never wrong. The judges might be individually fallible, but collectively, their preferences infallibly report (on the evidential reading) the truth about intrinsic value.
worse for my preferences. The competent judges argument seems to suggest that the experiences I like most just aren’t that valuable even though I may take a great deal of pleasure in those things. One might think, with Henry Sidgwick, that a hedonist must claim that there is nothing valuable about a pleasure other than its pleasantness. Sidgwick writes that if “what we are seeking is pleasure as such, and pleasure alone, we must evidently always prefer the more pleasant pleasure to the less pleasant: no other choice seems reasonable, unless we are aiming at something besides pleasure” (94). If that is so, then there is no room for a distinction between pleasures on account of their “quality”—whatever that might be. On this way of thinking, the only determiner of the value of a pleasure is its pleasantness. Quality should have nothing to do with it.

III. Two Failed Attempts to Save the Quality/Quantity Distinction

Jeremy Bentham defended hedonism before Mill. Bentham made no quality distinction between pleasures and consequently admitted no distinction between the value of ‘baser’ pleasures and those enjoyed only by beings with superior intellectual and emotional capacities (Bentham 1789). If Bentham is right, then any activity which produces pleasure, no matter what it is, is valuable to the degree to which it is pleasant. So if two individuals are equally pleased—one by studying philosophy, and the other by eating a box of donuts—their experiences are equally valuable.

Mill wanted to resist his predecessor’s conclusion, thus he motivated the higher pleasures doctrine by the competent judges argument. As we have seen, it is hard to make sense of the idea that some pleasures are higher quality than others in a way consistent with sensory hedonism. Recently, Nicholas Sturgeon has come to defend Mill against this charge of inconsistency (2010). As evidence, Sturgeon cites passages where Mill paraphrases “quantity”
as “intensity”. The most important passage for Sturgeon is from (II.8) where Mill discusses the preferences of the competent judges. In that passage, after making a quick argument for the reliability of the judges’ judgment on matters of quality, Mill turns to the “question of quantity”, about which he writes,

What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? (II.8, italics added)

The conclusion Sturgeon draws from this passage is that by “quantity” Mill means “intensity”, not “pleasantness”. Other interpreters read “quantity” as “pleasantness”. It is that allegedly defective assumption that Sturgeon blames for the view that Mill’s commitments to sensory hedonism and the higher pleasures doctrine is inconsistent. So, the view Sturgeon attributes to Mill is that quantity and quality are the two determiners of pleasantness: rather than, as other interpreters mistakenly assumed, quantity is pleasantness, while quality is some independent non-hedonic value-contributor. According to Sturgeon, quality and quantity combine to determine the overall pleasantness of a pleasure. If that is right, says Sturgeon, then Mill is not guilty of any inconsistency; the competent judges are making their determinations only on the basis of the pleasantness with which they are acquainted. It’s just that pleasantness has two components, not one.

Following Mill’s terminology in the competent judges passage we saw above, let us call “acquaintance” the relation one bears to characteristics of experience: characteristics like pain, pleasure, the presence of certain colors, shapes, and sounds, and so on. It is rather clear that one can be acquainted with the intensity (Sturgeon: “quantity”) of a pleasure. It is rather unclear, however, whether acquaintance with the other feature (“quality”) is possible. This is important because Sturgeon wants to read Mill as holding that the competent judges are judging pleasures
by their pleasantness alone so as to be consistent with sensory hedonism. So the judges must be acquainted with quality at risk of giving up sensory hedonism or the higher pleasures doctrine. It is not enough for the judges to be able to tell by acquaintance that some pleasures feel different than others, and that some of them are universally (or near-universally) preferred by the judges. If quality is genuinely in experience as part of pleasantness, and it is the basis for the judges’ preference—both of which Sturgeon accepts—then the judges need to be acquainted with quality.

Suppose the judges all prefer experience type X to experience type Y, regardless of variations in the different intensities of pleasantness in X and Y. According to Mill, it follows that X is of a higher quality than Y. Now if Sturgeon is right that quality is one of the determiners of pleasantness, then it also follows that in the view of the judges, X is more pleasant than Y. So far, so good. But if sensory hedonism is true, then what it is for X to be more pleasant than Y is for X to feel better than Y. And, if Sturgeon is right, the way in which X feels better than Y is independent of how intensely pleasant X and Y are, respectively. If sensory hedonism is true, the judges must prefer X to Y because X is more pleasant than Y. So, what is this “quality” that is separable in experience from intensity? “Quality” is entirely mysterious on Sturgeon’s interpretation.

A consequence of Sturgeon’s view is that if it is true and the judges are not acquainted with quality as such, then the judges are simply calling “quality” whatever it is that must be the basis of the assessments of comparative pleasantness they are making. That is incompatible with the judges’ decisions being based on perceived pleasantness. So, this interpretation fails to extricate Mill from the problem of inconsistency.
Ernest Sosa attempts another sympathetic reading of Mill (1969). Sosa argues that qualities are large amounts of quantity. So the difference in pleasantness between some lower quality pleasure X and some higher quality pleasure Y is nothing but a very large amount of pleasantness. Sosa’s example is the difference between a murmur and a shout: they are different in quality, different enough for us to give them different labels (rather than just “quiet talk” and “very loud talk”). But the only real difference is volume. Once the difference in volume is great enough, we call it a qualitative difference.

Sosa’s analysis of quality avoids the problem Sturgeon’s analysis raised, where pleasure-quality turned out to be some mysterious value-contributor. And Sosa’s analysis fits in nicely with the sensory hedonist view we have seen in Mill. But it does not appear that the analysis fits with Mill’s claim that higher quality pleasures will always be preferable to lower quality ones. Because all pleasures are on the same continuum of pleasantness, there seems to be no reason why some experience normally less pleasant could not, so to speak, ‘jump’ in quality. For example, maybe the pleasure of eating a perfectly-cooked steak is usually much lower than the pleasure of excellently performing a piece of music. But if Sosa’s interpretation is correct, it should be possible (even if very unlikely) on some occasion to get so much pleasure out of eating a steak that that experience is more pleasant than the music experience. Mill, however, seemed to want to disallow that, holding firmly that higher quality pleasures are always more pleasant than lower quality pleasures. On Sosa’s view there is no barrier between qualities, so nothing prevents a very intense lower quality pleasure from moving up levels. What separates the

11 Mill: “…[the competent judges] would not resign [a higher quality pleasure] for any quantity of the other [lower quality 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” (II:5).
qualities is just a matter of degree. So it is a contingent matter whether for some individual a particular experience is more or less pleasant than it is for another.

**IV. Higher Pleasures, Hedonism, or Neither?**

What conclusion should we draw? Sensory hedonism and the higher pleasures doctrine are incompatible. Still, hedonists can argue that since humans have most traits in common, we would tend to take similar amounts of pleasure in the same sorts of things if given a sufficient amount of time and opportunity. The hedonist can latch onto this idea and argue that while the higher pleasures doctrine is false because no pleasures are *intrinsically* better than others, people given the opportunity tend to take pleasure in similar things as a matter of fact. But if we take that line, what do we say about those whose pursuits are little more than the desire to gratify desires for wine, women, and song—or, in more contemporary terms, sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll? Well, if we reject the higher pleasures doctrine, we admit it is at least *possible* for someone to take more pleasure in those allegedly ‘base’ activities than they would in ‘higher’ intellectual activities. On the further assumption of sensory hedonism, it follows that those ‘base’ activities could make at least some individuals as well off as they can be. If sensory hedonism is true and the higher pleasures doctrine is false, it is likely that sometimes the best thing we can do for ourselves is just try to make ourselves feel good. I take great pleasure from working hard on my academic pursuits, enjoying music, and practicing activities that require skill and patience: ‘higher’ pleasures. But if sensory hedonism is true, perhaps *sometimes* the most worthwhile thing to do is have some French fries and a beer.
References


