Judgments of Intrinsic Value in Mill's Utilitarianism

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1999

Mill acknowledges and argues that it is essential for utilitarianism that it demonstrates the possibility, for the utilitarian, of justifiably making qualitative, or intrinsic, value judgments. The first and most obvious reason why this must be done is that we make such judgments all the time. We often say that some things or activities are inherently more valuable than others, and intuitively feel that we are not out of line doing so. Though one might make a mistake in judging (x) to be better than (y), the possibility that a correct judgment can be made is still accepted by most people. Thus Mill must show that Utilitarianism does not deny this intuitive stance. The second reason Mill must demonstrate the possibility of qualitative judgments for the utilitarian is that, on the surface of the theory[1], the commitment of utilitarian theory to pleasure as the criterion of goodness can be interpreted as denying the possibility of such judgments.[2]

In what follows, I will argue that Mill cannot provide an adequate justification for qualitative judgments while remaining consistent to the utilitarian commitment to pleasure as the criterion for nonmoral goodness. I will argue that the possibility of qualitative, or intrinsic judgments of any kind, is subject to an 'objectivist constraint'. All the constraint says is that any qualitative judgment requires, by virtue of the kind of judgment it is, a nonsubjective ground upon which, as it were, such a judgment is justified. The paper will begin by suggesting that if Mill is not able to show that

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[1] Mill recognizes this much in the opening pages of the second chapter of Utilitarianism. He sets out there to forestall a hedonistic interpretation of the theory.

[2] My concern in this paper will be with the utilitarian criterion for nonmoral goodness, rather than the criterion of rightness. The one, of course, cannot be discussed entirely without reference to the other. My reason, however, for focusing on the criterion of nonmoral goodness rather than that of rightness, is primarily structural. The variety of interpretations that utilitarians have suggested for the interpretation and application of the criterion of rightness are much too vast to be accounted for in the scope of the present paper. Nevertheless, all utilitarians, as far as I know, have accepted pleasure as the criterion of goodness. Part of the project of the paper is to explore the consequences of this commitment.

utilitarian can make qualitative judgments, his theory faces a relativistic threat. Following this, I will outline the objectivist constraint. I will then analyze Mill's argument from 'informed experience' in light of the constraint. It will be shown that Mill's arguments do not allow making the leap from empirical generalizations to the postulation of intrinsic facts. I will conclude the paper with a sympathetic reading of Mill's arguments.

Relativistic threats

Traditionally, any moral theory which maintains that the foundations of value are subjective faces the danger of relativism. For if value judgments have no other basis than personal or private verification---even if a large group of people share apparently identical values---then any judgment given ultimately stands on par with any other. Utilitarian theory[3] faces this danger in the following manner: if utility is defined in terms of the maximization of happiness, and happiness is equated with the maintenance and promotion of pleasure, then the criterion of the value of any given thing or activity can only be the pleasure produced by that thing or activity. Because any one pleasure is, in kind, equal to any other pleasure, and varies only by degree, any given value judgment takes the form of the measurement of pleasure. Hence, pleasure is to be understood as a quantifiable unit. If one thus wants to know whether reading poetry is more valuable than getting drunk and rowdy, one, as it were, compares the quantity of pleasure gained from each, and favors the activity with the greater sum. It must be admitted that this form of Utilitarianism is not relativistic in the sense of maintaining that any value is as good as any other---that knowledge, as a value, is the same status as pleasure as a value. For, according to Bentham, pleasure is the objective principle of value, and one ought to value those activities that contribute to pleasure and not value the opposite.[4] This much admitted, simple hedonistic

[3]In the argument that follows in this paragraph I will be referring to the simple hedonism of Bentham's
Utilitarianism

[4] This claim assumes a psychological theory that, I will argue at some point below, is denied by Mill in his proof: namely, that it is possible for the human being to desire something other than pleasure.

utilitarianism is, nevertheless, a form of relativism in the sense mentioned above: namely, that any value judgment stands on par---that is to say, has the same status---as any other. For given that pleasure is a subjective experience, if two people report the same degree of pleasure for two very different activities (say, between writing poetry and drinking beer) no discussion can occur apart from each stating his or her report. Assuming, in this case, their reports of pleasure had to be identical in terms of quantity of pleasure, it follows, says the simple utilitarian hedonist, that the activities are of equal value. After all, goodness is equated with pleasure. To make the problem the utilitarian faces more precise and tricky, take two people who have both had similar experiences with poetry and philosophy, but maintain opposing convictions concerning the value of one activity over the other. One maintains that poetry is more valuable than philosophy, and the other maintains the contrary. Each is asked to given arguments for their convictions. But on the simple hedonistic account of utilitarianism, each can only appeal to the degree of pleasure had in one activity over the other. But in this they also disagree. One insists that poetry brings more pleasure, and the other maintains the contrary. Even if we bring in other appropriately experienced individuals to help decide, it is entirely conceivable that no clear agreement can be reached. How then do we decide? For without some public---that is to say, non-subjective---standard of judgment, nothing more can be said between the two people mentioned here. Yet this seems obviously inadequate from both a theoretical and practical point of view. For we *want* to be able to engage in a positive discussion---in this case between poetry and philosophy---in which value judgments can be made which appeal to more than merely degrees of pleasure. But because we cannot, we can either accept the relativistic consequences outlined above, or turn our attention to the assumptions and requirements of the position itself--in this case, utilitarianism.

It is this latter concern that I will take up for the remainder of the paper. My reason for the lengthy opening argument was to suggest how utilitarian criterion of goodness could plausibly be interpreted. As I have suggested, the consequences of adopting such a position amount to a form of relativism, understood in the sense of lacking a nonsubjective ground from which to make a judgment, or to solve an argument, between two conflicting value

beliefs.[5] Though my sketch will, without doubt, give rise to any number of objections, I don't think my interpretation, here, is unfounded given a traditional understanding of what counts as a true justification: namely, the explication of objective principles by reference to which propositions are judged as either true or false.

The larger question I want to ask is whether Mill's account of utilitarianism escapes the threat of relativism. Mill, of course, thinks that it would be a misinterpretation of utilitarian theory to suppose that all pleasures are to be judged as being equal in kind. Mill believes that the utilitarian is *justified* in making *judgments* concerning higher and lower pleasures---and thus between more and less valuable activities---*on the basis of kind, that is to say, qualitatively rather than quantitatively, while remaining consistent with the principles of utilitarianism.* It is in this respect that Mill confidently states that "it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."(L1).

But, as I said initially, Mill is not justified in making this statement. To assert a qualitative difference is to assume the possibility of judgments founded upon the recognition of intrinsic differences. If Mill's arguments are to succeed, they must demonstrate an adequate ground upon which such judgments can be justified in the assertion of such differences. But this is exactly what his commitments to utilitarianism do not allow him to do. For any distinction, at least of the kind that Mill wants to make, that is founded upon a qualitative, or intrinsic, characteristic, requires an objective standard of justification. The possibility of such a justification requires a commitment to an objective metaphysics of some sort or another.[6] It is only by virtue of such a metaphysics that Mill can be justified in making any qualitative distinction at all. But Mill's arguments will be shown not to fulfill this

[5] This is not analogous to an empirical of a similar form. I would agree that simply because we do not possess the means to decide how many rocks are on the furthest planet on the furthest galaxy from the sun, it does not follow from this difficulty that there does not exist x number of rocks on that planet. This, however, is different from the problem Mill faces. For, in the empirical case, it is consistent with our current means of investigation (our technologies etc.), and our forms of justification to suppose that if we only had the right equipment we would be able to discover the answer. By contrast, given that pleasure, in some form or another, is the criterion by which the utilitarian measures goodness, disagreements of the kind that I have outlined cannot be solved without either abandoning the criterion altogether, or becoming inconsistent with it.

[6] That is to say, Platonic forms are not the only option

objectivist requirement, and thus prove to be inadequate for his aim. But this does not mean, as my introduction may have suggested, that Mill is to be tossed off, by default, as it were, as a relativist, though I will not deny that he *can* be criticized as one. Rather than arguing for or against this possible consequence, I will suggest that this is not the most useful or interesting way to understand the arguments Mill does put forth. Though Mill's arguments do not show that any intrinsic differences of value can be justifiably asserted (given the objectivist requirements of such assertions), they do, nevertheless, point the way to a reasonable form of moral discourse. The latter part of the paper will be devoted to fleshing out how his arguments can be understood as doing so.

Objectivist constraint for intrinsic valuations.

This constraint states that any judgment that claims to state an intrinsic, or qualitative difference between two given values or activities, requires an objective standard of some kind or another by virtue of which such judgments can be justified.

As Mill recognizes, to assert that the value of one pleasure can differ in kind from another---video games over poetry, for example---is to assert that one can distinguish between pleasures or states of happiness, and the activities conducive to it, on the basis of quality rather than quantity alone[7]. A quantitative measurement, in the case of utilitarianism, would take into account and compare the sum of pleasure units, or utiles, of each of the two things in question. The higher sum of course would prove to be the more valuable. But the difference in value is merely in degree of one common unit (pleasure). It would thus be possible for the reverse to occur. By contrast, a *qualitative* judgment would be founded upon the recognition of *an intrinsic difference*, that is to say, a difference in *nature* between the two given activities. For to differ intrinsically is to differ in kind. Thus, independent of

[7] "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others."(8) 'Kinds', here, is the equivalent of 'quality', as can be seen in the paragraph in which the quoted sentence is found.

circumstantial advantages[8] that could result from any two activities, or any degree in quantity of pleasure produced, one activity (say, video games) could be of a higher value by its very nature, or by the *kind* of thing it is, such that even the smallest amount of it would be more good/valuable than even the greatest amount of the other.[9] For, if (x) is qualitatively, that is to say, intrinsically more valuable than (y), by virtue of the kind of pleasure it is, then even if one has a vast quantity of (y)---because (y) is, in kind, less than (x)--- one would still be compelled to chose (x). But can such a judgment be justifiably given? What would be required such that a judgment of this kind could be true?

It seems clear to me that any such judgment requires some standard upon which the two pleasures/activities could be recognized and compared intrinsically. Such a comparison would be independent of any personal preferences or circumstantial benefits; the difference would have to be, as it were, self- evidently clear. Traditionally, this requires some form of objective criterion that would serve as a standard of judgment. It is only by virtue of such a criterion that a given judgment could be considered true or the contrary. The Platonic Form is the most readily, if unsophisticated, example of what I have in mind. It exists independently of personal belief or preference, and when clearly apprehended, provides the criterion against which two activities are judged. If one participates in the form of the Good, and by this fact is itself, by nature, good, and the other does so in a lesser degree, or not at all, then the obvious conclusion can be reached. If however, such a form or criterion did not exist, or could not be apprehended, then a judgment could not be made. For where do we, as it were, find the ground on which to stand that would allow us to say, independent of circumstances, that (x) is intrinsically better than (y)? Even if the justification of such a judgment does not need to rest on a third term---i.e.) an independent Platonic form--- the suggestion that (x) is of intrinsic value still requires some nonsubjective ground. This could entail, for example, direct perception of the intrinsic value of a thing, by virtue of some mental faculty of value recognition. It is, as I

[8] 'Independent of circumstantial advantages' is Mill's own constraint on what counts as a qualitative judgment. See Utilitarianism, pg8 for evidence.

[9] An informed knower, says Mill, "would not resign [a higher pleasure] for any quantity of the other pleasures which their nature is capable of"

have already said, my contention that the arguments Mill puts forward the success of which allows him, he believes, to both make intrinsic valuations and remain consistent with utilitarian principles, fail to satisfy the constraint outlined above.

Mill's Argument from Informed Experience

As far as I can tell, Mill puts forth only one argument. It is what I will call the 'informed experience argument'. Mill states that there is "one possible answer [to] what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except [in] its being greater in amount"(8). The 'one possible answer' goes as follows: If one, who has experienced, say, poetry and video games and the pleasures derived from each, consistently prefers one over the other, "irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation", then that pleasure, we must conclude, is not only the most desirable, but also the most valuable pleasure and activity. Moreover, if there happens to be a discrepancy over which pleasure is actually the most preferable and hence the most valuable, then the opinion of the majority is to be taken as final.[10] The fact that the majority of the appropriately experienced individuals are shown to prefer one pleasure over another proves not merely that people tend to desire it, but rather because it is more desirable, *it is* more valuable.[11] In this respect, it is important that Mill shows that the preferred pleasure is preferred in-itself, or because of its intrinsic nature "irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation." For if it was thought that one or the majority believed it to be the most valuable, and hence the most desirable, because of a duty towards desiring and valuing that pleasure/activity, Mill would not have shown how utilitarianism can make sense in it its own terms of qualitative valuations. People could value poetry more because they have, for some reason, a moral imperative to value poetry more than video games. It would thus be possible

[10] "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."(11).

[11] This ties in with the reasoning behind Mill's 'proof' for the greatest happiness principle: happiness is shown to be the final and only end of human action because people desire happiness.

to explain is more desirable even though it doesn't produce the greater amount of pleasure. But this is not a utilitarian explanation. Poetry must be shown that it is the more desirable thing because, given the greatest happiness principle, it brings about the most happiness, understood in terms of pleasure, for the greatest number. However, this conclusion, Mill wants to argue, is not reached by a quantitative calculation of the utility of poetry, but rather by a qualitative judgment of the value of poetry itself founded upon a recognition of the *kind of thing that poetry is*. Thus the utilitarian would be able to say that even though poetry may, given a quantitative calculation, appear to be more dissatisfying than video games, it is still the more desirable.

But happiness, and hence value, is not judged by merely the degree of desirability of an activity, but by the degree of pleasure obtained in that activity. Desirability, therefore, stands in proportion to the degree of pleasure. How, then, can one activity that is more dissatisfying be more desirable, given that dissatisfaction is not usually equated with pleasure? Mill's answer suggests that if it is a 'higher' pleasure, then even the smallest amount of it is better than the largest amount of any lower pleasure.[12] But that something is a higher pleasure and is to be preferred as such cannot be shown by a quantitative measurement, but must be demonstrated to be qualitatively distinct. That (x) is qualitatively distinct is supposed to be demonstrated by the informed experience argument: the informed majority consistently prefer one over the other, not because of some moral obligation, but because it is intrinsically more desirable. But if it is the case that (x) is more valuable, this cannot be shown by the fact that the majority of people desire it. If anything, this only demonstrates that value is equal to degree of desirability, not that (x) is intrinsically valuable. The problem of relativism is, however, obvious in this conclusion. For, the occurrence of one's desire for (x), and the fact that (x) is desirable, can be shown to be a subjective affair. Imagine a world in which the informed majority did not agree on what constituted a higher pleasure and what constituted a lower---an informed majority that, having had the experience of poetry and wine, chooses the latter. Or, alternatively, having had the experience of philosophy and poetry cannot get a majority

[12] See above: ft 10.

rule or consensus on which is the more valuable. This picture is certainly not a logical impossibility, and thus serves to demonstrate that the inference from an empirical generalization (that the majority desire (x) over (y)) to a statement of fact (that (x) is valuable intrinsically), is not justified. By contrast, if (x) is to be judged as intrinsically more valuable, any desire for (x) results from, or is caused by, the value of (x). In order to show that this is so, one might argue that there are, as I have said, objective imperatives that dictate that we read poetry instead of play video games. And it is by virtue of this imperative, that one pleasure gains its status as a higher value. Given Mill's utilitarian commitments, all that can be shown is that the informed majority desire (x). But from this fact alone there can be no inference to the statement that it is intrinsically more valuable. At most, (x) can only be shown to be desirable, and valuable by virtue of this, by an appeal to the consequences that result from preferring (x) over (y). But this does not satisfy Mill's own requirement that that a qualitative judgment be nonconsequential in form. Mill himself says that a thing's "intrinsic nature" can be known "apart from circumstantial advantages"(pg.8) they might bestow. In addition, because the fact that (x) is desired is the only ground offered of the valuation of (x), Mill does not satisfy the objective restraint given above. For there is no justifiable inference from a subjective criterion to an objective statement of fact.

Closing remarks: The intuitive appeal of informed experience

If what I have said is sound, and Mill is not able to assert a qualitative difference in the way that he wants to, does that then mean that he must be rejected and tossed aside as unable to fend off relativism and, by this fact, to be seen as nonuseful theoretically? As I said above, I do not think such conclusions need to follow. Mill's argument from informed experience, I think, provides a reasonable model for ethical discourse---an ethical discourse that begins, as Mill acknowledges, with the recognition of the inability to prove first principles as one would expect of the first principles of a science. In other words it is an ethical discourse that has no aspirations to model itself on science, either in terms of its justifications or its proofs. The Informed experience argument makes the simple, intuitively coherent

suggestion that if one wants to know what is a more valuable, better, fulfilling way of life or activity, one should go and talk to those that have 'been around', who are well experienced and have demonstrated integrity in their actions. It would be foolish to ask the average teenager preoccupied with his or her dramas, or the long time floor manager at the local aluminum factory, for their opinions concerning poetry. One, of course, ought to go ask a poet who has experienced both. Contrary to the relativist trend of our time, in which any opinion is on par with any other, taking seriously the idea of informed experiencer opens the way to reconsidering the idea of 'elders'. This is the idea that those people who have lived a rich and full life---and lived it well---may rightly be taken as ' authorities', in a nonscientific sense, on matter of living, namely, ethics.