

Unhappy Humans and Happy Pigs

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John Stuart Mill is famous for having expanded Bentham's utilitarianism to incorporate 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the dictum "better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."¹ In this paper I argue that this dictum is inconsistent with utilitarianism's own conception of the 'good'. My argument shall proceed through several stages: In section one I present and defend a form of 'hedonic calculus', the use of which will be essential if we are to quantify happiness (as utilitarianism aims to do.) The calculus I suggest will be based on considerations as to how we might compare a human being's happiness with that of a lower animal. I present some arguments as to why I think a utilitarian should accept this calculus. In section two I examine Mill's conception of the 'good', and analyze his famous quotation in the light of this. I argue that, by this very criterion, it is *not* necessarily better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. In section three I examine how best to extricate ourselves from this situation, and I put forward the suggestion that if we want to maintain the belief that it *is* better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied (a belief which, intuitively, we probably *do* wish to maintain), it *cannot* be based on utilitarian considerations.

Mill's quotation refers to 'satisfaction'; henceforth I shall follow Bernard Williams² in using 'happiness' and 'satisfaction' interchangeably, so the question of whether or not it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied is equivalent to the question of whether or not it is better to be an unhappy human than it is to be a happy pig. I therefore argue that by the criteria of utilitarianism it is not better to be an unhappy human than it is to be a happy pig. It may be argued that pigs, unlike humans, are not really *capable* of happiness. However, since the quotation sees fit to use 'satisfaction' as

¹ JS Mill, 'Utilitarianism', JM Dent and Sons (1972), p. 9.

² Smart and Williams, 'Utilitarianism: For and Against', Cambridge University Press (1973).

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applicable to both, and since I am using the terms ‘satisfied’ and ‘happy’ interchangeably, this need not be problematic.

Furthermore, it may be claimed³ that the reason it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied is that the human has the capacity to contribute to a greater net level of happiness in *society*. In this essay I propose to isolate an *individual* human and an *individual* pig, and compare only the respective happiness of each, independently of the greater good to which they may or may not have the capacity to contribute.

I

Implicit in Mill’s quotation is the assumption that human and animal happiness is comparable. We therefore need to examine *how* a comparison could be carried out. I suggest that for a comparison, we need a means of quantification.

Mill was concerned to show the ‘fundamental humanity’ of utilitarianism, and claimed, therefore, that “a beast’s pleasures do not satisfy a human being’s conception of happiness”⁴. As Smart notes⁵, the reluctance of a person to sacrifice his humanity for animal happiness indicates that human happiness somehow penetrates *deeper*, is somehow more *profound*, than that of a pig. Any calculus that we use to quantify happiness must therefore take into account the fact that human happiness is, *prima facie*, deeper⁶.

I assume that animals have sensory experiences like we do, in the sense that, as with us, there is ‘something it is like’ to be them⁷. The issue of what *precisely* differentiates us from other animals is not within the scope of this paper, but in terms of comparing our respective happiness it seems reasonable to

³ For example by JJC Smart (Smart and Williams).

⁴ Mill, p. 7.

⁵ Smart and Williams, p. 21.

⁶ William Shaw says of animals that “their lives lack the complexity and psychological richness of ours.” (William H Shaw, ‘Contemporary Ethics: Taking Account of Utilitarianism’, Blackwell (1999), p. 41).

⁷ Thomas Nagel, ‘What is it Like to be a Bat?’.

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suppose that the primary differentiating factor is our capacity for *reflection*, for having a ‘pro-attitude’ towards our own happiness⁸.

Consider a maximally happy human (A) and a maximally happy animal (B): for B, we may suppose that the satisfaction of desires constitutes the highest level of happiness. The capacity for *reflection* in A, however, necessitates that we add another level when examining A’s capacity for happiness. So, a maximally happy person will not only have all his desires satisfied, he will also be able to somehow *reflect* on his situation, and *know* that all his desires are satisfied. Animals, it seems, lack this capacity for self-reflection⁹.

How, then, are we to incorporate this consideration into a calculus? Taking the person’s capacity for self-reflection into account, we may suppose a two-tier view, whereby a person’s pro-attitude is included in the calculation of his overall happiness: a person is *fully* happy if he is happy, and he *knows/recognizes* this to be the case (and is happy about it). Given that an animal is unable to reflect upon its own happiness, a fully happy animal is not able to fulfill this second condition; it is not able to know/recognize that it is happy. A fully happy person is therefore happy on *two* levels, a fully happy animal merely on *one*. Thus, if we were to award points for happiness at each of the levels, a fully happy person would be worth *two* points, a fully happy animal *one*¹⁰.

It follows of course that a *fully* happy person is happier than a fully happy animal: level-one happiness for each consists in the mere satisfaction of desires, but a person’s *overall* capacity for happiness is greater, by dint of the person’s being able to *reflect* on his level-one happiness. Thus, if happiness is

⁸ See, for example, Andrew Moore, ‘*Hedonism*’ (2004), Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁹ See Colin Allen, ‘*Animal Consciousness*’, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

¹⁰ Empiricists, such as John Locke, seem to endorse such a two-tier view. Locke claims that human ideas are derived from sensation or reflection, and that the “understanding seems...not to have the least glimmering of any ideas which it doth not receive from one of these two.”

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the criterion of the good, it is better to be a satisfied person than a satisfied pig (recall that I am using ‘happiness’ and ‘satisfaction’ interchangeably).

This, however, is *not* Mill’s claim. He claims that it is better to be a *dissatisfied* (unhappy) person than it is to be a satisfied pig. How, then, do a dissatisfied person and a satisfied pig compare according to our calculus? It may be recalled that a fully satisfied animal is worth one point (being incapable of self-reflection). How much is a dissatisfied person worth? It is obvious that a dissatisfied person is less happy than a fully happy person, and, given that a fully happy person scores two points (one for happiness on each of the two levels) a dissatisfied (unhappy) person must score *less* than two points.

Perhaps a dissatisfied person could score less than two but *higher* than one (and thus still be less happy than a fully happy person and more happy than a fully happy pig). It has been suggested that a person’s happiness can be viewed on two levels, and on each level a person can either be happy or unhappy. Thus, a fully happy person is happy on both of the two levels. A less than happy person is therefore only happy on one of the two levels, and scores at most one point, whilst a fully *unhappy* person is happy on *neither* level, and scores zero.

Some interesting things follow: a totally depressed (i.e. maximally unhappy) person is less happy than a happy pig, so it would, according to the calculus, be better to be a happy pig than a depressed person¹¹. However, we need not equate the *dissatisfied* person with the *maximally unhappy* person. Since the unhappy person is lacking happiness on either of the two levels (but need not do so on both), he is worth one point. We have seen that a happy pig is also worth one point, so a happy pig is equal in happiness to an unhappy person.

¹¹ Mill considers higher pleasures but he seems to neglect higher *pains*. If it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied by dint of the human’s capacity for higher pleasures, then why not say that it could equally be *worse* by dint of our capacity for higher pains? Presumably we are capable of experiencing more profound varieties of pain than are animals. This, and similar points, are interestingly highlighted in Michael Leahy’s repudiation of the animal rights movement.

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However, why should utilitarians accept this calculus? One of the reasons, I believe, is that utilitarianism requires that happiness be quantifiable. The ‘points’ system I have suggested seems at best ad hoc, but if happiness *is* to be quantifiable there needs to be some kind of *unit* of quantification. As Williams says¹², happiness must be ‘calculable’. Another reason why the calculus I have outlined should be accepted by a utilitarian is that it is based on reasonable considerations as to the differences between humans and animals, a comparison that is rendered necessary by Mill’s quotation. If it *is* the capacity for reflection that differentiates humans from animals, then human happiness would seem to require the extra level that I have suggested. Thus, given that happiness must be quantifiable, we can assign values to the respective happiness of humans and animals that take into account this basic difference between them¹³.

II

Implicit in the claim that one thing is better than another is a conception as to what it is that makes something ‘good’. As Geoffrey Scarre has highlighted, for utilitarianism to be tenable, there needs to be an “organising feature of experience which functions as the common denominator of good.”¹⁴ For utilitarianism, then, ‘happiness’ serves this purpose. Happiness, Mill claims, is the only thing that is intrinsically good, all other things being good inasmuch as they are a means to, or part of, this end.¹⁵

Now, the calculus in the above section shows that it is *not the case* that an unhappy person contains more happiness than a happy pig. Of course, we haven’t yet confronted Mill’s claim that the *type* of happiness is important, but,

¹² Bernard Williams, ‘Morality’, Cambridge (1972), p. 87.

¹³ In assigning these values, we may be, as Smart says, “assuming what is perhaps a fiction” (p. 60).

¹⁴ Geoffrey Scarre, ‘Utilitarianism’, Routledge (1996), p. 139.

¹⁵ Mill, p. 6.

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when we consider happiness purely quantitatively, as I believe utilitarianism must, we can see that, taking into account differences between human and animal natures, an unhappy person does not score more 'points' than a happy pig. I have, furthermore, attempted to argue that such a 'points' system is really the only viable way of making utilitarianism work: Mill's quotation requires that happiness be comparable, comparison requires that happiness be calculable, and calculability necessitates units of quantification.

We are now in a position to observe how the claim that it is 'better' to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied functions, and how it is incompatible with utilitarianism's conception of the good. In section one we saw that an unhappy person is not happier than a happy pig. We can also now observe the fact that the phrase 'better than' asserts of one thing that it contains more 'good' than something else. So, if utilitarianism's conception of the good is 'happiness', then to say of one thing A that it is better than another thing B is to say that A contains more happiness than B. So, when Mill claims that "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied", his own criterion of the good renders this equivalent to saying "an unhappy human contains more happiness than a happy pig." But this is exactly what the calculus in section one has shown to be false.

Thus, if the criterion of the 'good' is happiness, it is not better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.

III

From what has been said thus far, we can observe a certain inconsistency in the following two propositions:

- 1) Utilitarianism is correct
- 2) It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.

Where, then, do we go from here? I have interpreted 'utilitarianism is correct' as containing 'happiness is the criterion of the good' as a necessary condition.

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Perhaps a way out is to challenge this and argue that utilitarianism does not *have* to proceed using ‘happiness’ as the criterion of the good.

As Smart has highlighted¹⁶, ‘Ideal’ utilitarianism holds that other things, besides happiness, have intrinsic value. Smart calls Mill a ‘quasi-Ideal utilitarian’. If this is the case then it may be that we can accommodate the view that it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied on grounds *other* than happiness into a utilitarian framework. This, however, seems an obtuse interpretation of Mill, who explicitly states that whilst “the ingredients of happiness are very various”¹⁷ it is happiness *itself* that is the only thing possessing intrinsic value.

It could further be argued that Mill’s conception of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures means that human happiness is intrinsically better than that of a pig, since it is of an altogether different, *higher* type. If this is the case, then we may be able to maintain ‘happiness is the criterion of the good’ as a necessary condition of utilitarianism, whilst adding the qualification that this should be construed as *higher* happiness.

As H.B Acton notes¹⁸ Mill was perhaps influenced by Whewell’s observation that if only quantity (and not quality) is taken into account, the Greatest Happiness Principle becomes the ‘Greatest Animal Happiness Principle’. However, given that utilitarianism is based on a conception of the good as comparable, calculable and additive, it seems as though happiness, as the criterion of the good, can differ only in *degree*, and not in *kind*, for how can two *kinds* of things be comparable? John Grote, in a very early commentary on utilitarianism, claimed that “a consistent utilitarian can scarcely hold the difference of *quality* in pleasures in *any* sense”¹⁹. Things admit of comparison only in the degree to which they fulfill a certain end, so for human beings’ and pigs’ happiness to be comparable they must *not* differ in kind, otherwise the

¹⁶ Smart and Williams, p. 12-27.

¹⁷ Mill, p. 33.

¹⁸ Mill, p. xiii.

¹⁹ Cited by Acton in Mill, p. xiii.

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very notion of comparison wouldn't make sense. In bringing in 'higher' happiness as a different *kind* of happiness altogether, Mill is destroying the very commensurability that is required to affect a comparison. 'Higher' pleasures thus seem to possess a non-utilitarian value, and therefore seem inappropriate in a utilitarian system.

Given that utilitarianism *does* indeed seem to claim happiness as the sole criterion of the good, and given that the quantification and comparison of happiness is more easily made sense of when we consider *degree* rather than *kind*, it does indeed seem as though we need to do away with either 1 or 2.

Which one should it be? In presenting the calculus in section one I attempted to adumbrate how a utilitarian should deal with the problem of whether or not it is better to be a happy pig or an unhappy human. We could therefore see that the way utilitarianism must treat the problem cannot yield a verification of Mill's dictum. However, the calculus seemed somehow inappropriate. Since I presented some reasons as to why I think such a calculus is indispensable for a utilitarian (inasmuch as he wishes to compare human and animal happiness), any lingering feelings of inappropriateness may be due to the inherent implausibility of utilitarianism. As Williams says, "utilitarianism cannot hope to make sense, at any serious level...of human desire and action at all, and hence only very poor sense of what was supposed to be its own specialty, happiness."²⁰ Given this consideration, I suggest that the most likely candidate for abandonment is 1.

At any rate, if we hold that 1 and 2 are inconsistent (as I have claimed that we should), *and* we believe that it is somehow better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, we should hold this belief *independently* of utilitarian considerations. Unfortunately however, it is not within the scope of this paper to inquire further into what our considerations should in fact be.

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²⁰ Smart and Williams, p. 82.

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