Mill on Happiness

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It is well-known that Mill explicitly rejects Bentham’s quantitative hedonism. However, there is considerable debate about the implications of Mill’s so-called qualitative hedonism. I argue that, despite Mill’s continued use of hedonistic language, he rejects hedonism altogether in favor of “eudaimonism,” the view that human happiness is primarily constituted by the development and exercise of our higher rational faculties. First, I show that Mill explicitly characterizes happiness in eudaimonic terms. Then I argue that Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures is most coherent if he is read as a eudaimonist. Then I argue that Mill’s emphasis on freedom of opinion and freedom of individuality of lifestyle in *On Liberty* is most coherent if he is read as a eudaimonist.¹

We find the bulk of Mill’s discussion of happiness in chapter two of *Utilitarianism*. However, it begins on what sounds like a sour note for a eudaimonic interpretation. As early as the second paragraph, Mill says:

> . . . 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 [. . .] Pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and [. . .] all desirable things [. . .] are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.²

Here, Mill claims that pleasure is the only intrinsic good, a hedonistic statement if there ever were one. However, it is important that we read this remark in its broader context.

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Just like most hedonists, Mill points out that “pleasure” does not refer merely to “brutish” physical pleasures, but to all types of pleasure, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, or otherwise. But unlike hedonists, Mill goes on to generalize the notion of so-called “pleasure” to something other than mere enjoyable feelings or sensations of any type. *Utilitarianism* provides us with a variety of examples. For one, Mill says “to think of an object as desirable [ . . . ] and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing,” and “what is the principle of utility if it be not that ‘happiness’ and ‘desirable’ are synonymous terms?” Given this, it appears that Mill’s initial statement of supposed hedonism is simply a sign that he is stuck with some hedonistic language from his philosophical forefathers which he is now attempting to revise by broadening “pleasant” to mean something like “partially constitutive of happiness,” and “pleasure” to be used as just one of many synonymous terms such as “happiness,” “utility,” “valuable,” “desirable,” etc. Additional excerpts from *Utilitarianism* further support this, as we start to see Mill shying away from using the word “pleasure” (or any variation or close synonym) altogether. For example, Mill says that “With much tranquility, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure,” and “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.” Thus “pleasure” is not even a necessary term for the ultimate good, but just one of many terms Mill uses synonymously to identify whatever it is to which the greatest happiness principle refers.

This is not unlike Aristotle’s initial identification of the ultimate end of action as “happiness” (the standard translation of *eudaimonia*). Everyone agrees that happiness is the goal of life, Aristotle says, but not everyone agrees about what exactly constitutes happiness; therefore an inquiry into the nature of the good life is required in order to give
a substantive account of happiness. At this point in Aristotle’s discussion, “happiness” is a mere token for whatever the good life will turn out to be. In the same way, Mill’s “pleasure” is a mere token for whatever is desirable, valuable, worthwhile, constitutive of happiness – whatever that turns out to be. Thus, to label Mill a hedonist simply because of his initial claim that pleasure is the only intrinsic good would be to make the mistake of not reading that claim in the context of his whole ethical philosophy.

Furthermore, reading Mill as a eudaimonist rather than a hedonist helps strengthen some of Mill’s other claims and arguments regarding the nature of happiness, especially when he uses eudaimonic rather than hedonistic language to characterize happiness. For example, in chapter four of *Utilitarianism*, Mill considers an important objection to his “proof” of the principle of utility; namely, the objection that people in fact desire things other than happiness, such as virtue. This is certainly a serious objection when offered against hedonistic utilitarianism. To be charitable, one would have to agree with the hedonists that people typically value pleasure *per se* and avoid pain *per se*, and typically avoid particular pleasures or seek particular pains when they believe doing so will result in a net gain of pleasure or net reduction of pain. Furthermore, the rare particular individual who does avoid pleasure or seek pain for its own sake more likely represents an example of a person with psychological abnormalities rather than an exception to a hedonistic value theory.

However, most people also believe that there are other things of value besides pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and not merely the instrumental value of contributing to a net gain of pleasure over pain – virtue, for example. The hedonist then usually goes to great lengths to provide convoluted and highly speculative arguments to the effect that
these things are simply instrumentally valuable to pleasure – for example, by arguing that the virtuous person will have a more pleasant life and that society as a whole will be better off with virtuous people than without. Mill, of course, has recourse to these arguments, and there is probably something to them, but they still do not seem to remove the force of the strong and widely held intuition that there is something inherently valuable about virtue in and of itself, over and above any net gain of pleasure it may afford us. Luckily, Mill can account for this too, precisely because his conception of happiness is eudaimonic rather than hedonistic.

Mill states that utilitarianism “maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself.”\(^9\) Virtue is one among many things, including but not limited to pleasure, which “are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are part of the end.”\(^10\) In other words, Mill has an aggregative notion of happiness, and not merely as an aggregate of pleasures, but an aggregate of a variety of goods. Some of these goods, such as pleasure, are natural and universal; others, such as virtue, require cultivation: “Virtue, according to the Utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but it is capable of becoming so; and in those who love it disinterestedly it has become so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part of their happiness.”\(^11\)

If Mill truly were a hedonistic utilitarian, this would be an extremely sloppy – if not downright inconsistent – characterization of happiness. However, if Mill is providing an eudaimonic picture of happiness and the role of virtue in eudaimonic happiness, it all makes much more sense. Then it is clear that Mill does not view happiness as a maximal sum of enjoyable sensations, but rather a complete “good life” which consists of many
things, each of which is desired as instrumental to, and/or partially constitutive of, happiness. The perfect example of this is virtue, especially an Aristotelian notion of virtue. Virtue is both instrumental to and partially constitutive of happiness. In the former case, virtue is a means to good choices and actions, which in turn help a person create the kind of life in which happiness is possible. This especially seems the case with the developing moral agent, trying to become virtuous by way of habituation and education. However, once one becomes virtuous, one sees the intrinsic value of virtue and does virtuous actions for the sake of virtue itself and furthermore finds pleasure in virtue itself, and so comes to desire virtue in and of itself where perhaps before they did not.

Unfortunately, Mill gets sloppy and ends up sounding relativistic, and makes it sound as though anything which someone might in fact desire for its own sake – such as money, power, or fame – is legitimately a part of happiness, properly understood. Any of these things which originally serves a merely instrumental purpose can, as a matter of psychological fact, become desired for its own sake, and be seen by someone as one element within an aggregate of happiness. This appears to be more relativistic a characterization of happiness than it seems Mill intended, given everything else that Mill says about happiness, especially the doctrine of the higher and lower pleasures. An at length discussion of this doctrine follows shortly, but for the time being it is enough to simply note that the higher, more valuable “pleasures” (in the broad sense in which Mill uses it) are those linked to the exercise of the higher, distinctly human faculties. Thus, it is true that something such as money might in fact be part of an individual person’s conception of happiness, but that wouldn’t make that person as happy as possible if that
person valued other things even more, things which contributed more to eudaimonic rather than hedonistic happiness. Also, Mill could simply say that in the case of a person such as this, it may simply be an error in that person’s reasoning, since money really is simply (potentially) instrumental to happiness, but some things such as virtue are also partially constitutive of happiness, eudaimonically conceived. Thus, this is an example of how interpreting Mill as a eudaimonist not only adds to the clarity and coherence of his ethics, but perhaps even improves it, saving it from any sort of “happiness relativism.”

As is well known, Mill denies the classical hedonistic utilitarians’ claim that pleasures can always be distinguished from one another quantitatively (accounting for intensity, duration, etc.). He claims that some pleasures are also qualitatively better than others; that is, that there are higher and lower pleasures which are qualitatively distinct from one another, even if not quantitatively so. Unfortunately, Mill’s argument for the existence of the higher and lower pleasures and how they are recognized is unnecessarily obscure. He appears simply to say: “Ask those who know the difference, and they’ll tell you” – not the sort of argument that philosophers like to hear. However, Mill can defend this distinction on eudaimonic grounds, and do so more clearly, easily, and coherently than he could on hedonistic grounds. The distinction implicitly relies on the eudaimonic idea that the higher pleasures are those deriving from the higher and distinctly human capacities.

This is clearly indicated in *Utilitarianism* when Mill says that “it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both [higher and lower “pleasures”] do give a most marked
preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties.”

Like Aristotle, Mill is pursuing the notion of human happiness, a distinctly human happiness that will involve a distinctly human kind of life. This in turn involves the use of the higher and distinctly human faculties. Moreover, this is not a mere philosophical bias, but an essential component of a distinctly and appropriately human life. According to Mill, this is demonstrated by the unwillingness of “a being of higher faculties” to ever “sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence,” that is, one in which he does not have and cannot exercise his higher faculties. Mill states this himself most elegantly:

its most appropriate appellation [that of the aforementioned “unwillingness”] is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong that nothing which conflicts with it could be otherwise than momentarily an object of desire to them. Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness – that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier that the inferior – confounds the two very different ideas of happiness and content.

This passage more clearly than any other indicates that Mill’s conception of happiness is not mere pleasurable sensation, but a kind of appropriately human life, involving the active use of those faculties most conducive to human “dignity” – that is, that involve the exercise and development of the distinctly and appropriately higher human faculties. This would be a challenging position for a hedonist to take, but a
natural one for the eudaimonist; thus the best possible explanation is simply that Mill is a eudaimonist rather than a hedonist. Therefore, Mill’s qualitative distinctions among the “pleasures” is symptomatic of his eudaimonism.

Furthermore, interpreting Mill as a eudaimonist not only is the best possible explanation for his use of this distinction but also serves to improve his argument for the distinction in the first place. Mill gives more value to the “higher pleasures” because, like Aristotle, he associates happiness with the development and exercise of the distinctly human higher rational capacities. The place where this is most clear is in Mill’s discussion of freedom of thought and opinion in On Liberty.

Mill’s arguments for freedom of speech are the most fully developed, not to mention the most frequently read, sections of On Liberty. It is my contention that Mill’s emphasis on the importance of freedom of expression is indicative of his eudaimonism. In the following section, I argue that Mill’s emphasis on freedom of speech and its importance for the rational development (and, in turn, the well-being) of humanity is simply a case of Mill wearing his eudaimonism on his sleeve. That is, it would certainly be possible – if Mill were a classical Benthamite hedonist – to argue that freedom of speech is necessary for the rational development of humanity, which in turn is merely instrumental for the maximization of hedonistic pleasures; however, he does not in fact make these explicit arguments. The best possible explanation is simply to take Mill’s assertions of the importance of rational development to happiness as eudaimonic on its face: that rational development is (at least partially) constitutive of happiness, essential as it is to the well-being of persons, both individually and collectively, and is proper to a distinctly human life.
In chapter two of *On Liberty*, Mill claims that freedom of opinion is required not only in order to discover truth, but also in order to make it possible for people to fully understand and appreciate the truth. This allows people to hold their opinions in a fully rational manner rather than as a mere prejudice. This in turn is necessary if those opinions are to have any effect upon a person’s “character and conduct,” rather than merely being held as a dogma “inefficacious for good.”\(^{18}\) Mill concludes this by noting that freedom of opinion and expression of opinion is necessary for the “mental well-being of mankind (on which all their other well-being depends).”\(^{19}\) This emphasis on “mental well-being” is decidedly eudaimonic-sounding.

One of Mill’s initial arguments against the legislation of opinion involves certain epistemological positions on his part. Mill, as is well known, is a thorough empiricist, and as such, Mill denies the possibility of absolute certainty on any matter, since all opinions are always open to revision based on new empirical data. Therefore, no human being is infallible on any matter, and as a consequence, has any authority to decide the opinions of humankind as a whole, nor the authority to suppress opinions he believes to be erroneous; to do so is to “exclude every other person from the means of judging.”\(^{20}\) This emphasis on the importance of each person having the means of exercising the rational capacity for moral judgment also carries a decidedly eudaimonic tone.

The validity of such an empiricist denial of absolute certainty in such matters as mathematics or logic is perhaps doubtful, but in regard to the primarily relevant issue of ethical and political opinions, the point is well taken. Mill of course does not deny that as a practical necessity, human beings must act and live according to the most certainty of which they are capable, but he does deny that one’s own sufficient certainty can be forced
upon another, because it is the very freedom of opinion which is a pre-condition for the possibility of attaining sufficient certainty for one’s own conduct.\textsuperscript{21} This is important for Mill because he believes that an individual’s ethical views cannot progress unless that individual has the opportunity to judge those views. The very ability of human judgment to affirm or deny opinions rests on its ability to exercise itself upon the means of judgment – that is, the ability to come to a conclusion after considering the various and conflicting opinions and arguments surrounding an issue which one has to consider in order to come to a rationally-justifiable (if not always correct) position of one’s own. Legislating opinions withholds this means.\textsuperscript{22}

Free debate and discussion is especially important in the pursuit of knowledge for Mill, not only because of his empiricism (again, entailing that all beliefs are subject to revision based on new data, constant testing, etc.), but also because he has a dialectical notion of knowledge. This is especially true in “practical” (that is, ethical and political) concerns, which require the “reconciling and combining of opposites” and “the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners.”\textsuperscript{23} Also: “In politics, again, it is almost a commonplace that a party of order or stability and a party of progress or reform are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.”\textsuperscript{24} Combined with the fact that Mill believes that most opinions are neither wholly true nor wholly false but some combination of the two,\textsuperscript{25} and that debate and discussion are required to separate out the true from the false among and within opinions, it is easy to see why Mill places such importance on the widest possible freedom of speech, especially for the development of ethics and politics, the “sciences of the good,” as Aristotle might have said.
Furthermore, the exercise of rational judgment is a necessary component not only for the progress of truth and knowledge, but also of the well-being of people, both individually and collectively. Mill asserts that beliefs assented to without having reached them by way of rational judgment are no more than mere dogma, even if true, and that “this is not the way in which truth ought to be held by a rational human.” Mill is here pointing out that the exercise of rational judgment is proper to a distinctly human life. This is the sort of thing which a hedonist could only hold after a great deal of tap-dancing – which again, Mill does not explicitly do – but which is quite natural for the eudaimonist. Furthermore, the continual exercise of judgment is required in order for people not only to hold certain beliefs, but also to truly appreciate them, and the lack of this exercise can in turn have profound negative consequences for the development and maintenance of character “until it almost ceases to connect itself at all with the inner life of the human being.” This demonstrates another similarity between Mill and Aristotle. Practical reasoning, and not moral virtue alone, is a necessary component of ethical practice. Moreover, the exercise of practical reasoning is necessary for the virtues of character, since the former helps to shape the latter.

The above discussion demonstrates the overwhelming emphasis that Mill places on freedom of speech not only for the proper development and use of the human capacity of rationality, but also for the well-being of mankind, both individually and collectively. This emphasis is best explained by positing that Mill’s conception of happiness is eudaimonic rather than hedonistic. In addition, Mill makes similar arguments in his next chapter, “Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being,” and similar conclusions can be drawn about his views on happiness from them as well. As in the
previous section, it is my contention that Mill’s emphasis on the importance of individuality is indicative of his eudaimonism. It would certainly be possible for Mill, were he a Benthamite, to argue that individuality is merely instrumental for the maximization of hedonistic pleasures; however, he does not in fact make these explicit arguments. The best possible explanation is simply to take Mill’s assertions of the importance of the freedom of individuality to happiness as eudaimonic on its face: that freedom of individuality is (at least partially) constitutive of happiness, essential as it is to the well-being of persons, both individually and collectively, and is proper to a distinctly human life.

In chapter three of *On Liberty*, Mill argues that maximum freedom of action, choice, and lifestyle is essential to happiness. Essentially, Mill claims that the same sorts of arguments which he provides for the freedom of opinion also apply to the freedom to act upon one’s opinions, as long as they do not harm another, and even if they do harm oneself. This line of argument makes perfect sense when seen in the context of a eudaimonic conception of happiness rather than a hedonistic one. Just as human beings are not infallible concerning their opinions in general, nor do they have the authority to decide the opinions of others, neither are they infallible concerning opinions about the proper way to lead one’s life, nor do they have the authority to decide the lifestyles of others. Just as continual empirical “experimentation” and “testing” of opinion, by way of constant examination, debate, and discussion, are required to hit upon the best possible opinions, so too are “experimentation” and “testing” necessary to hit upon the best possible life: “as it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different
opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others.\textsuperscript{30}

Notice the reference to “varieties of character.” Mill believes that humans, unlike perhaps other animal species, are largely different and individual, with a variety of tastes, desires, and interests; and thus, the freedom to choose one’s own mode of life is essential to the good life for each individual. Furthermore, Mill characterizes this with a variety of decidedly eudaimonic terminology: “well-being,” “proper condition of human beings,” “maturity of his faculties,” “character,”\textsuperscript{31} etc., and all these things are linked essentially to individuality and the liberty to act and live according to them. This would indeed be odd terminology for a committed hedonist to use without going on to make explicit connections between these things and hedonistic pleasure.

Furthermore, the idea that human beings are unique individuals is essential to Mill’s notion of happiness. The Ancients and the (Neo-Classical) Enlightenment thinkers typically defined human beings as “the rational animal,” and Mill certainly believes that the exercise of reason is one essential aspect of human happiness, as already discussed. However, Mill also believes that humans are defined by their individuality, as well as their ability to exercise individual choices; this is probably a reflection of the influence of the Romantic thinkers of the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries on Mill’s thought. Mill argues that individuals, rather than society, must decide what is the best life for them. Certainly they may take into account the accumulated experience and wisdom of their society, but ultimately, these things can only serve in an advisory capacity. This is for practical reasons: societal wisdom is necessarily general, and might not apply to every individual perfectly; but even if the wisdom itself were perfectly applicable to the individual, an
essential aspect of individual happiness is coming to this wisdom for oneself through the use of one’s distinctly human faculties, not only of reason, but also of choice:

Though the customs be both good as customs and suitable to him, yet to conform to custom merely as custom does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perfection, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular, powers are improved only by being used.\(^{32}\)

This again gives clear evidence of Mill’s eudaimonism: Mill believes that an essential part of human happiness is the exercise of the higher human faculties, which Mill identifies not merely as the exercise of theoretical reason, but the exercise of practical deliberation – that is, choice. Therefore, Mill argues for the necessity of maximum freedom of choice (within the constraints of avoiding harm to others) precisely because the very exercise of choice itself is an essential part of human happiness, eudaimonically conceived.

This last point cannot be stressed enough. For Mill, humans are not defined simply by rationality, but by individuality and the capacity to exercise individual choice. This is clearly supported by the wide variety of references to individuality explicitly characterized in eudaimonic terms. For example, Mill states that a person who does not choose his own courses of action and plan of life, using all of his distinctly human
faculties to do so, needs nothing more than the faculty of “ape-like imitation.” He might be guided by others to a pleasant life, but “what will be his comparative worth as a human being?” Mill also says that humans, unlike “sheep,” cannot develop without variety of action and lifestyle, any more than can all plants grow in the same climate: “The same things which are helps to one person toward the cultivation of his higher nature are hindrances to another.” Furthermore, individuality is not merely a pre-requisite for development, but an element of it: “Individuality is the same thing with development, and [ . . . ] it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings.”

Finally, Mill says: “There is a Greek ideal of self-development [ . . . ] It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation.” The Greek ideal to which he refers is precisely the sort of thing that Aristotle had in mind in his discussion of eudaimonia. This, more than any other excerpt, drives the final nail into the coffin of a supposedly hedonistic Mill.

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1 “Eudaimonism” and its relatives (“eudaimonic,” “eudaimonist,” etc.) makes for rather ugly terminology. However, it seems appropriate, given that I am arguing that Mill’s conception of happiness has so much in common with Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia. The secondary literature on Mill suggests other possibilities, but none with exactly the connotation I prefer. Peirgiorgio Donatelli uses the term “perfectionism” with reference to Mill’s concept of the self (“Mill’s Perfectionism.” Prolegomena 5:2 (2006), 149-164). Though, as I argue, Mill definitely has an ideal of self-development in mind as constituting part of his notion of happiness, I’d hesitate to call him a “perfectionist,” since I believe that Mill has an aggregative notion of happiness in mind which also contains non-perfectionist goods such as pleasure. Also among those goods is the exercise of one’s deliberative faculties, almost regardless of the outcome of those deliberations, as I discuss a bit later in this paper; in that respect, I think David Brink’s interpretation of Mill bears closer resemblance to my own (cf. David O. Brink “Mill’s Deliberative Utilitarianism.” Philosophy and Public Affairs 21:1 (Winter 1992), 67-103).
An additional and interesting issue for which I simply don’t have the space in this paper is whether or not qualitative hedonism is even coherent. If not, so much the better for my position, I think: if qualitative hedonism is incoherent, then Mill can’t be a qualitative hedonist, if he’s anything at all. So he’s either a quantitative hedonist (which he explicitly denies), or he’s not a hedonist. However, nothing in my paper really turns on this: even if qualitative hedonism is coherent, I simply don’t think that Mill is a qualitative hedonist, as I argue. Those interested in this debate could look to F.H. Bradley (Ethical Studies, Oxford, 2nd ed., 1927, pp. 119-120) for the classic objection to the coherence of qualitative hedonism, to which Wendy Donner nicely responds (The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill’s Moral and Political Philosophy, Ithaca and London, 1991, pp. 42-3). More recently, each side of the issue has been argued by Geoffrey Scarre (“Donner and Riley on Qualitative Hedonism.” Utilitas. 9:3 (1997), 351-360) and Jonathan Riley (“Is Qualitative Hedonism Incoherent?” Utilitas. 11:3 (1999), 347-358).
24 OL, 45.

25 OL, 44: “Popular opinions . . . are often true, but seldom or never the whole truth,” etc.

26 OL, 34-5.

27 OL, 38-9.

28 OL, 53 ff. Note that “well-being” is a possible translation of eudaimonia.

29 OL, 53-4.

30 OL, 54.

31 OL, 55.

32 OL, 55-6.

33 OL, 56.

34 OL, 65.

35 OL, 61.

36 OL, 59-60.