

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW.

THE ALLEGED FALLACIES IN MILL'S "UTILITARIANISM."

IT may well seem superfluous, at this time of day, to discuss once more the familiar argument of Mill in the essay on "Utilitarianism." Have not the undoubted fallacies in that argument been shown up again and again by critics alike of the Intuitionist and of the Idealistic school? The present writer formerly shared this view,¹ but repeated study of the essay has convinced him of its essential injustice. All that is necessary, in defence of Mill from the charge that he has fallen into fallacies which are patent to the veriest tyro in logic, is to interpret his argument in the light of its context and of the purpose the author has in view. It is usual, while admitting Mill's candor and "sympathetic insight," to accuse him at the same time of a "facility in making compromises"² and a transgression of the most familiar rules of logic which is hardly credible in the author of an epoch-making work on that subject. Even so careful a writer as Professor Sorley attributes to him "a logical quibble" which is discreditable either to his candor or to his intelligence. I have preferred to assume that Mill is at once candid and coherent in his reasoning, and I think I have succeeded in clearing up the apparent fallacies, if not in eliminating the inconsistencies, in his ethical thought as presented in the famous essay.

To take first the most glaring, and therefore to my mind the most incredible case, the critics have with one consent accused Mill of committing the fallacy either of Composition or of Divi-

¹ See Preface to ninth edition of *A Study of Ethical Principles*.

² J. S. Mackenzie, *Introduction to Social Philosophy*, p. 204.

³ *Ethics of Naturalism* (2d ed.), p. 65.

sion in his "proof" of Utilitarianism, that is, in effecting the transition from egoistic to universalistic Hedonism. The argument in question is as follows: "No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons."¹ "It would be difficult," says Professor Mackenzie, "to collect in a short space so many fallacies as are here committed."² Let us confine our attention, in the meantime, to "the fallacy involved in the inference that 'the general happiness is a good to the aggregate of all persons.'" "The fallacy is that which is known in logic as 'the fallacy of composition.' It is inferred that because my pleasures are a good to me, yours to you, his to him, and so on, therefore my pleasures + your pleasures + his pleasures are a good to me + you + him. It is forgotten that neither the pleasures nor the persons are capable of being made into an aggregate. . . . Mill's argument would hold if the minds of all human beings were to be rolled into one, so as to form an aggregate. But as it is, 'the aggregate of all persons' is nobody, and consequently nothing can be a good to him. A good must be a good for somebody."³

Similarly Professor Sorley says: "J. S. Mill, while emphasising the distinction between modern Utilitarianism and the older Epicureanism, has even allowed his official 'proof' of utilitarianism, — such proof, that is, as he thinks the principle of Utility to be susceptible of, — to rest on the ambiguity between individual and social happiness."⁴ "'No reason,' he says, 'can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness.' And this admission, which seems as good as saying that no reason at all can be given why the individual should desire the general

¹ *Utilitarianism* (9th ed.), p. 53.

² *Manual of Ethics*, p. 219.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 219–220.

⁴ *Ethics of Naturalism*, p. 47.

happiness, is only held to be a sufficient reason for it, through the assumption that what is good for all as an aggregate is good for each member of the aggregate: 'that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.'"¹

Professor Dewey's criticism is on the same lines. "Does it follow," he asks, "that because the happiness of *A* is an end to *A*, the happiness of *B* an end to *B*, and the happiness of *C* an end to *C*, that, therefore, the happiness of *B* and *C* is an end to *A*? There is obviously no connection between the premises and the supposed conclusion. And there appears to be, as Mill puts it, only on account of the ambiguity of his last clause, 'the general happiness a good to the aggregate of all persons.' The good of *A* and *B* and *C* may be a good to the aggregate ($A + B + C$), but what universalistic hedonism requires is that the aggregate good of $A + B + C$ be a good to *A* and to *B* and to *C* taken separately, — a very different proposition. Mill is guilty of the fallacy known logically as the fallacy of division, — arguing from a collective whole to the distributed units. Because all men want to be happy, it hardly follows that every man wants all to be happy."²

Even the late Professor Sidgwick, in the long series of revisions to which he subjected the *Methods of Ethics*, seems to have remained convinced to the end of the justice of such a criticism of Mill's famous "proof." "In giving as a statement of this principle that 'the general happiness is *desirable*,' he must be understood to mean (and his whole treatise shows that he does mean) that it is what each individual *ought* to desire, or at least, — in the stricter sense of 'ought,' — to aim at realising in action. But this proposition is not established by Mill's reasoning, even if we grant that what is actually desired may be legitimately inferred to be in this sense desirable. For an aggregate of actual desires, each directed towards a different part of the general happiness, does not constitute an actual desire for the general happiness, existing in any individual; and Mill would certainly

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

² *Outlines of Ethics*, pp. 55-56.

not contend that a desire which does not exist in any individual can possibly exist in an aggregate of individuals. There being therefore no actual desire, — so far as this reasoning goes, — for the general happiness, the proposition that the general happiness is desirable cannot be in this way established: so that there is a gap in the expressed argument, which can, I think, only be filled by some such proposition as that which I have above tried to exhibit as the intuition of Rational Benevolence.”¹

Now it is perfectly clear that, if Mill is attempting, in the argument in question, to prove that the general happiness is an object to be desired by each individual since each individual desires his own happiness, he is guilty of the fallacy of which his critics so unanimously convict him. The previous question, however, is whether he is attempting anything of the kind. Sidgwick alone has thought it necessary to offer any evidence that this is the object of the “proof” offered in chapter iv. After quoting Mill’s statement that, while proof, in the strict sense, is impossible, “considerations may be presented capable of determining the intellect to” accept “the Utilitarian formula,” he says that “he subsequently makes clear that by ‘acceptance of the Utilitarian formula’ he means the acceptance, not of the agent’s own greatest happiness, but of ‘the greatest amount of happiness altogether’ as the ultimate ‘end of human action’ and ‘standard of morality’: to promote which is, in the Utilitarian view, the supreme ‘directive rule of human conduct.’ Then when he comes to give the ‘proof,’ — in the larger sense before explained, — of this rule or formula, he offers the following argument.”² But if we take Mill’s own statement of the meaning of “the utilitarian doctrine,” given in the passage which we are discussing, we find that it is not the doctrine of Utilitarianism in the full sense of universalistic Hedonism, but simply the underlying and more general doctrine of Hedonism itself. “Questions about ends are, in other words, questions what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only de-

¹ *Methods of Ethics* (6th ed.), p. 388.

² *Ibid.*, p. 387.

sirable as means to that end."¹ The chapter is entitled, "Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible," and when we turn to chapter ii for a definition of the "Principle of Utility," we find that "the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness"; and that "the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded" is "that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain."² All that Mill is attempting to prove, therefore, is that the object of aggregate desire, since it must be the same as that of individual desire, and this is happiness, is aggregate happiness. What he conceives himself to have proved is, in his own words, "that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as *one* of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality."³ There is no suggestion that the conclusion is that the general happiness is a good to each individual, but only "to the aggregate of all persons." It is the critics who, knowing that Mill's ethical standard is the general happiness, have read the former meaning into his present argument, assuming that he is here attempting to prove the validity of that criterion, while what he is really dealing with is the more elementary principle of Hedonism itself, and his argument simply is that, since the good of the individual,—that which he desires and regards as desirable,—is happiness, the object of aggregate or collective (not individual) desire can only be happiness. There is no word of the attitude of the individual to the general happiness; there is no passing over from the collective to the distributive sense of the terms.

That this is the true interpretation of the argument becomes

¹ *Utilitarianism*, ch. iv, p. 52.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

still more evident from Mill's final statement of the result. "It results from the preceding considerations, that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. . . . We have now, then, an answer to the question, of what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible. If the opinion which I have now stated is psychologically true, — if human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness, we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct ; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole."¹ And the chapter closes with the following words : "Both in feeling and in conduct, habit is the only thing which imparts certainty ; and it is because of the importance to others of being able to rely absolutely on one's feelings and conduct, and to oneself of being able to rely on one's own, that the will to do right ought to be cultivated into this habitual independence. In other words, this state of the will is a means to good, not intrinsically a good ; and does not contradict the doctrine that nothing is a good to human beings but in so far as it is either itself pleasurable, or a means of attaining pleasure or averting pain. But if this doctrine be true, the principle of utility is proved."² It is unreasonable to suppose that, in thus concluding the argument, Mill should have omitted all reference to the essential element in the thesis supposed to have been proved. But we find him once more identifying "the principle of utility" with that of Hedonism, not with that of universalistic Hedonism or Utilitarianism.

The second in the "collection of fallacies" which this passage contains, according to Professor Mackenzie and others, is the result of "an ambiguity in the word 'desirable.'" "The only

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 57, 58.

² *Ibid* p. 61.

proof,' he says, 'capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it. . . . In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.' It is here assumed that the meaning of the word 'desirable' is analogous to that of 'visible' and 'audible.' But 'visible' means 'able to be seen,' and 'audible' means 'able to be heard'; whereas 'desirable' does not usually mean merely 'able to be desired.' When we say that anything is desirable, we do not usually mean merely that it is able to be desired. There is scarcely anything that is not able to be desired. What we mean is rather that it is *reasonably to be desired*, or that it *ought* to be desired. When the Hedonist says that pleasure is the only thing that is desirable, he means that it is the only thing that *ought* to be desired. But the form of the word 'desirable' seems to have misled several writers into the notion that they ought to show also that pleasure is the only thing that is *capable* of being desired. . . . The fallacy here involved is that known to writers on Logic as the 'Fallacy of Figure of Speech' (*figuræ dictionis*)."¹ And Professor Sidgwick remarks: "It has been suggested that I have overlooked a confusion in Mill's mind between two possible meanings of the term 'desirable,' (1) what can be desired, and (2) what ought to be desired. . . . I was aware of this confusion, but thought it unnecessary for my present purpose to discuss it."²

Here, again, I cannot believe that Mill was the victim of such an obvious fallacy. We must remember that the little work so severely dealt with by the critics is a popular essay, not a philosophical treatise, and that it originally appeared in the pages of *Fraser's Magazine*. We are not to look, therefore, for the precision of statement which would be natural in a scientific work. Mill assumes that what we ought to desire must be at the same time what we can desire, that the desirable in the ethical sense must be found within the field of the desirable in the psychological sense, although the two fields are not, of course, coexten-

¹ Mackenzie, *Manual of Ethics*, pp. 213, 214 (footnote).

² *Methods of Ethics*, p. 388 (footnote).

sive. Or, to express the distinction and the relation between the two senses of the term in another way, he assumes that the Good, — that which is truly to be desired, — must be found within, and not without, the sphere of goods, that is, the things which we actually desire. What he seeks to prove is “that to think of an object as desirable . . . and to think of it as pleasant, are one and the same thing; and that to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.”¹ The conclusion of the argument is, in his own statement, that “nothing is a good to human beings but in so far as it is either itself pleasurable, or a means of attaining pleasure or averting pain.”² And we must admit that the truth of the doctrine of psychological Hedonism carries with it the negation of any non-hedonistic theory of the Good, or the desirable in the sense of what ought to be desired. While we cannot say that what we are able to desire is, as such, what we ought to desire, we must admit that what we ought to desire is what we are able to desire. It follows that, if pleasure is the only thing that we can desire, what we ought to desire cannot be anything other than pleasure.

Another fallacy of which Mill has been accused, though not so frequently or so explicitly, is that of *Ignoratio Elenchi* or Irrelevancy. Professor Sorley says, for example, that “he confused the purely psychological question of the motives that influence human conduct with the ethical question of the end to which conduct ought to be directed.”³ Others have maintained that he confused the question of the sanctions of right conduct with that of its obligatoriness. But it is quite clear that in chapter iii, “Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility,” Mill is concerned solely with the question of the motivation of right or utilitarian conduct, with the *feeling* of obligation, and how it may be produced. “The question is often asked,” he says, “and properly so, in regard to any supposed moral standard, — What is its sanction? what are the motives to obey it? or more specifically, what is the source of its obligation? whence

¹ *Utilitarianism*, p. 58.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³ *Ethics of Naturalism*, pp. 63, 64.

does it derive its binding force? It is a necessary part of moral philosophy to provide the answer to this question; which, though frequently assuming the shape of an objection to the utilitarian morality, as if it had some special applicability to that above others, really arises in regard to all standards. It arises, in fact, whenever a person is called on to *adopt* a standard or refer morality to any basis on which he has not been accustomed to rest it. For the customary morality, that which education and opinion have consecrated, is the only one which presents itself to the mind with the feeling of being *in itself* obligatory: and when a person is asked to believe that this morality *derives* its obligation from some general principle round which custom has not thrown the same halo, the assertion is to him a paradox; the supposed corollaries seem to have a more binding force than the original theorem; the superstructure seems to stand better without, than with, what is represented as its foundation. He says to himself, I feel that I am bound not to rob or murder, betray or deceive; but why am I bound to promote the general happiness? If my own happiness lies in something else, why may I not give that the preference?"¹ And when he comes to describe the deeper sanction, undiscovered by his predecessors, with the exception of Hume, of the utilitarian morality, namely, the natural sympathy with the general happiness, "the feeling of unity" with our fellows, he says that it is "this basis of powerful natural sentiment . . . which, when once the general happiness is recognised as the ethical standard, will constitute the strength of the utilitarian morality."² Comte, he says, has "shown the possibility of giving to the service of humanity, even without the aid of belief in a Providence, both the physical power and the social efficacy of a religion; making it take hold of human life, and colour all thought, feeling, and action, in a manner of which the greatest ascendancy ever exercised by any religion may be but a type and foretaste; and of which the danger is, not that it should be insufficient, but that it should be so excessive as to interfere unduly with human freedom and individuality."³

¹ *Utilitarianism*, pp. 39-40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

From these statements it is clear that the problem with which Mill is concerned, in this chapter at least, is simply the psychological and practical one of the normal dynamic, and that his solution of that problem is found in the Christian "enthusiasm of humanity." We are far too apt to think of Mill as a technically philosophical writer, because we cannot help thinking of him as the author of the *Logic*, and to forget that he, no less than Bentham and the other Utilitarians, is primarily dominated by the practical interest of the social reformer. He is really far more interested in the question how, "once the general happiness is recognised as the ethical standard," this ideal is to be practically realised, than in the question of the ethical criterion and its proof. It is, therefore, entirely to miss the point of Mill's argument in this chapter to discover in it a merely subjective interpretation of moral obligation, as Mr. Bradley does in the following statement: "Not only has moral obligation nothing in Mr. Mill's theory to which it can attach itself save the likes or dislikes of one or more individuals, but in the end it *is* itself nothing more than a similar feeling. . . . I should say that any theory which maintains that a man may get rid of his sense of moral obligation if he can, and that, if he does so, the moral obligation is gone, is as grossly immoral a theory as ever was published. Does Mr. Mill repudiate the doctrine? Not at all; he evidently accepts it, though he prefers not to say so. . . . If then all that the moral 'ought' means is that I happen to have a feeling which I need not have, and that this feeling attaches itself now to one set of pleasures and now to another set according to accident or my liking, would it not be better altogether to have done with the word, and, as some have done, openly to reject it and give it up, since already we have given up all that it stands for?"¹ Mill is not concerned with the question of the objective basis or validity of moral obligation, but only with its subjective or psychological explanation.

Are we, then, to conclude that Mill offers no proof of Utilitarianism as an ethical theory, no demonstration of the general happiness as the moral criterion? The truth is, in my opinion, that

¹ *Ethical Studies*, pp. 111, 112.

he thinks formal proof as unnecessary as it is impossible. Hedonism he does attempt to prove, as we have seen; but having proved that pleasure is the only thing ultimately desirable or good, he seems to think that it follows that the good, and therefore the ethical criterion, is the general happiness, or the greatest happiness, not of the individual, but of the greatest number of individuals. If we would make explicit the ground of this conclusion, which is left implicit by Mill himself, it would be found, I think, in the consideration that, since pleasure is the Good, the greater pleasure must, as such, be better than the less, and the greatest happiness of the greatest number (if not of all sentient beings) must therefore be better than the greatest happiness of the individual or of any number of individuals less than the total number. He assumes, as a matter of common sense, what Sidgwick represents as the result of an application of the principle of impartiality or equality, namely, that from the point of view of happiness, which is essentially a quantitative or mathematical whole, each ought to count for one and no one for more than one. The distributive principle of the Good is found, in other words, in the nature of the Good. Hence, he says, "let utilitarians never cease to claim the morality of self-devotion as a possession which belongs by as good a right to them as either to the Stoic or to the Transcendentalist. . . . The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality."¹ It must be remembered that, as Mr. Douglas has pointed out, "it is more characteristic of Mill's Utilitarianism than of any preceding hedonistic system of ethics to consider the facts of moral experience directly, and to make them the basis of ethical theory. He never loses that sense of an objective and obligatory end for human conduct which is the essential element

¹ *Utilitarianism*, pp. 24, 25.

in the moral judgment of actions.”¹ It is significant that, in the one reference he makes to an explicit basis of altruistic duty (though even here it is in a practical interest that he refers to it), Mill suggests the possibility, since exploited by Sidgwick, of a reconciliation of Utilitarianism and Intuitionism through the principle of benevolence. “If there be anything innate in the matter, I see no reason why the feeling which is innate should not be that of regard to the pleasures and pains of others. If there is any principle of morals which is intuitively obligatory, I should say it must be that. If so, the intuitive ethics would coincide with the utilitarian, and there would be no further quarrel between them. Even as it is, the intuitive moralists, though they believe that there are other intuitive moral obligations, do already believe this to be one; for they unanimously hold that a large *portion* of morality turns upon the consideration due to the interests of our fellow creatures.”²

That Mill’s point of view is essentially identical with the Quantitative or Mathematical point of view of the late Professor Sidgwick is made clear from his final account of Justice in chapter v. “This great moral duty,” he tells us, “rests upon a still deeper foundation, being a direct emanation from the first principles of morals, and not a mere logical corollary from secondary or derivative doctrines. It is involved in the very meaning of Utility, or the Greatest-Happiness Principle. That principle is a mere form of words without rational signification, unless one person’s happiness, supposed equal in degree (with the proper allowance made for kind), is counted for exactly as much as another’s. Those conditions being supplied, Bentham’s dictum, ‘everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one,’ might be written under the principle of utility as an explanatory commentary.”³ And in the footnote to this passage he adds: “This implication, in the first principle of the utilitarian scheme, of perfect impartiality between persons, is regarded by Mr. Herbert Spencer (in his *Social Statics*) as a disproof of the pretensions of utility to be a sufficient guide to right; since (he says) the principle of utility

¹ *Ethics of J. S. Mill*, Introductory Essays, p. lxxx.

² *Utilitarianism*, pp. 44, 45.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 93.

presupposes the anterior principle, that everybody has an equal right to happiness. It may be more correctly described as supposing that equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether felt by the same or by different persons. This, however, is not a presupposition; not a premise needful to support the principle of utility, but the very principle itself; for what is the principle of utility, if it be not that 'happiness' and 'desirable' are synonymous terms? If there is any anterior principle implied, it can be no other than this, that the truths of arithmetic are applicable to the valuation of happiness, as of all other measurable quantities."

But does not altruistic Hedonism or Utilitarianism contradict the underlying doctrine of psychological Hedonism? As Mr. Bradley has said, "If all that I desire and can desire is my pleasure, . . . then the sole desirable is a state or states of my own feeling, and in the second place, whatever is a means to that. To desire an object which is not the idea of my pleasure is psychologically impossible. . . . And such an object is the idea of the pleasure of others considered not as conducing to mine. . . . To tell me the pleasure of others is desirable for me, is to tell me you think it will conduce to my own."¹ Or, as Professor Sorley has put it, "Utilitarianism only becomes a practicable end for individual conduct when psychological hedonism has been given up. It is futile to say that one ought to pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number, unless it is possible for the individual to act for something else than his own pleasure,—that is, for an end which is for him not pleasure at all. In a word, utilitarianism, while maintaining that the only thing worth desiring is pleasure, must at the same time admit that pleasure is not the only object that can be or is desired: otherwise, it can never advance from the egoistic to the universalistic form."² But does not such a criticism, when applied to Mill, ignore the other factor in his ethical psychology, namely, sympathy? Man is naturally, according to Mill, sympathetic with the pleasures and pains of others; he is a social, and not a merely selfish being, and his

¹ *Ethical Studies*, p. 103.

² *Ethics of Naturalism*, p. 77.

social sympathy carries with it the extension of his desire of pleasure to the pleasure of others, which he desires as if it were his own. Conscious as he is of his unity with them, he identifies himself with them, and seeks for them what he seeks for himself, and as if he were seeking it for himself, namely, pleasure. If he were not thus naturally sympathetic, he could never make the transition from his own pleasure to that of others; his sympathy makes him unconscious of any transition from the one to the other. Here, again, we must remember that Mill's real interest lies in the practical rather than in the theoretical problem, and we have seen that it is to sympathy that he looks as the great agent in the promotion of the general happiness by the individual.

As regards the doctrine of "psychological Hedonism" itself, while it can hardly be doubted that Mill did actually hold that view, I cannot but think that, in the present work, it is not this doctrine, in any strict sense, that he is concerned to defend. If his statements and admissions in the course of the argument are carefully noted, it will be found, I think, that when he says that "happiness" is the sole object of human desire, he is using the term in a large popular sense, to include the things in which happiness is found, rather than in the strict sense in which he has defined it in chapter ii: "By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain;" and it is significant that he uses, throughout the argument, the term "happiness" rather than the term "pleasure." His thesis, as he himself states it, is that "human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness."¹ In summing up the result of the discussion, he says that "it results from the preceding considerations, that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. Those who desire virtue for its own sake, desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united. . . . If

¹ *Utilitarianism*, p. 58.

one of these gave him no pleasure, and the other no pain, he would not love or desire virtue, or would desire it only for the other benefits which it might produce to himself or to persons whom he cared for."¹ Or take the following statement of the problem and of its solution: "And now to decide whether this is really so; whether mankind do desire nothing for itself but that which is a pleasure to them, or of which the absence is a pain. . . . Desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable, or rather two parts of the same phenomenon; in strictness of language, two different modes of naming the same psychological fact: . . . to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences), and to think of it as pleasant, are one and the same thing; and . . . to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility."²

All that Mill is concerned to prove, then, is that pleasure is not merely a constant but a determining element in desire and choice; he does not maintain that it is the constant object of desire and choice. And if the former seems to us, as Sidgwick says, a statement so obvious as to be almost a tautology, we must remember that its familiarity is due to the advance of psychology since Mill's time, and that Mill had an important polemical interest in emphasizing the omnipresence of pleasure in desire and choice, since, if pleasure were inseparable from the ends which determine human action, a strong presumption would be created in favour of the hedonistic theory of Good. And as against a merely rationalistic or rigoristic theory of the Good, the demonstration of the presence of pleasure as the determining principle in all desire and choice might well seem to be final. It is to be remembered that Mill is not conscious of the distinction between pleasure as the dynamic and pleasure as the object of choice, and that he uses the same term "pleasure" indifferently in the two senses of "pleasant object" and "pleasant state" or "pleasantness." This very looseness in the use of the

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 57, 58.

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

leading term in the argument suggests that the point of his argument does not require insistence upon the distinction.

That this is the true interpretation of Mill's argument is confirmed by his account of the relation of happiness as a whole to its constituent elements or "parts," as well as by his account of the relation of desire to its object. "The ingredients of happiness," he says, "are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate. The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as for example, health, are to be looked upon as means to a collective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end."¹ "In being desired for its own sake," such an object "is, however, desired as *part* of happiness. The person is made, or thinks he would be made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it. The desire of it is not a different thing from the desire of happiness, any more than the love of music, or the desire of health. They are included in happiness. They are some of the elements of which the desire of happiness is made up. Happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts."² To desire a thing he defines as to "think of it in a pleasurable light, or of its absence in a painful one";³ he includes in the term "the repelling influence of pain as well as the attractive one of pleasure."⁴ Mill classifies desires as primitive and acquired, and in both cases he recognizes the presence of an object, other than pleasure or pain, to which the desire is directed. "Life would be a poor thing, very ill provided with sources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature, by which things originally indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures."⁵ In the case of the desire of

¹ *Utilitarianism*, p. 54.

² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

power or fame, "it is the strong association thus generated between them and all our objects of desire, which gives to the direct desire of them the intensity it often assumes, so as in some characters to surpass in strength all other desires."¹ Similarly in the case of the love of money, "the desire to possess it is often stronger than the desire to use it, and goes on increasing when all the desires which point to ends beyond it, to be compassed by it, are falling off. It may then be said truly, that money is desired not for the sake of an end, but as part of the end. From being a means to happiness, it has come to be itself a principal ingredient of the individual's conception of happiness."² And "the desire of virtue is not as universal, but it is as authentic a fact, as the desire of happiness."³

There remains the most notorious of all Mill's so-called fallacies, namely, the introduction into a hedonistic theory of a qualitative distinction between pleasures. Even in this case, however, I question whether, if we take careful account of the way in which the distinction is introduced and used by Mill, we shall find it to be really inconsistent with his fundamental position. He is dealing with the objections to Utilitarianism which arise from a misconception of the doctrine. Among these unfounded objections is that "to suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure, — no better and nobler object of pursuit," is "a doctrine worthy only of swine." The answer is that "the comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification."⁴ Not only, however, is man capable of pleasures of which the mere animal is incapable; not only does human happiness contain elements not found in animal happiness, but those men who are competently acquainted with what are generally called the higher forms of

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

human happiness are unanimous in their preference of these to the so-called lower forms, and so absolute is this preference that they prefer the higher pleasure, "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. . . . No intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he, for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him."² The higher being's "sense of dignity" 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."²

The argument, then, is simply that, as a matter of psychological fact, the pleasures which form the constituent elements of human happiness are different from those which make up the happiness of the mere animal; that the human subject of happiness not merely prefers certain classes of pleasures to certain others, but regards the former as preferable in kind to the latter, and that this preference determines the nature of his happiness: the desire is so set upon certain forms of happiness that their absence makes the man unhappy. That the distinction between higher and lower pleasures is only intended, however, as a provisional, not as a final distinction is clear from the fact that Mill proceeds to reduce what is, from the individual point of view, a qualitative distinction, to a merely quantitative one from the social point of view. "I have dwelt on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of human conduct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian standard; for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness alto-

¹ *Utilitarianism*, pp. 12, 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

gether ; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it."¹ And as if to put an end to any possible lingering question in the reader's mind as to the objective validity of the qualitative distinction which is yet so vital an element in the happiness of the individual, Mill thus explicitly states the value of the good or virtuous will : " Both in feeling and in conduct, habit is the only thing which imparts certainty ; and it is because of the importance to others of being able to rely absolutely on one's feelings and conduct, and to oneself of being able to rely on one's own, that the will to do right ought to be cultivated into this habitual independence. In other words, this state of the will is a means to good, not intrinsically a good ; and does not contradict the doctrine that nothing is a good to human beings but in so far as it is either itself pleasurable, or a means of attaining pleasure or averting pain."²

That the distinction between the higher and the lower pleasures is ultimately for Mill not a qualitative, but a quantitative distinction, becomes clear from the account of the paramount claims of Justice in chapter v. " Our notion, therefore, of the claim we have on our fellow creatures to join in making safe for us the very groundwork of our existence, gathers feelings round it so much more intense than those concerned in any of the more common cases of utility, that the difference in degree (as is often the case in psychology) becomes a real difference in kind. The claim assumes that character of absoluteness, that apparent infinity, and incommensurability with all other considerations, which constitute the distinction between the feeling of right and wrong and that of ordinary expediency and in expediency."³ Interpreting the statement of the qualitative distinction between pleasures in chapter ii in the light of this passage, we see that all that Mill intended to assert was that, " as is often the case in psychology," a transcendently important " difference in degree " " becomes a real difference in kind " ; for it is obvious that from the

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

social, if not also from the individual point of view, the so-called "higher" pleasures do thus differ from the so-called "lower" in the degree of their utility or hedonistic importance. I think, therefore, that we must agree with Professor Stewart when he says: "It is sometimes urged that Mill has no right 'on his own principles' . . . to recognize, as he does, a qualitative difference between pleasures. I venture to maintain that few moralists have a better right. His critics seem to forget that his standard of conduct is the public good. His standard of conduct is emphatically not pleasurable feeling. Only an eristic treatment of isolated phrases (phrases which need not surprise any one who looks at Mill's system in its place in the History of English Ethics) could represent it as such. Mill's 'hedonism' is pretty much on a par with that of the writer of the E. N., vii, 11-14."¹

All that I have tried to prove, however, in this case as in that of psychological Hedonism, is that Mill was not concerned, in the essay on Utilitarianism, with the deeper ethical question which we cannot help raising. His entire argument is dominated by the practical purpose which inspires the essay, as it inspired the Utilitarians as a group of thinkers who were primarily not theoretical moralists, but social reformers. Had the deeper question, whether the qualitative distinction in pleasure has objective, as well as subjective, logical as well as psychological, validity occurred to Mill, I cannot doubt that he would have seen, as clearly as his critics have since done, the essential inconsistency of such a view with a hedonistic theory of ethics.

JAMES SETH.

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

¹ *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Vol. II, p. 434.