



PLEASURE AND DESIRE.

IF anyone interested in observing contemporary opinion were asked what was the prevailing moral system in England at the present day, he would probably answer Utilitarianism. And if anyone interested in promoting practical morality had to state the most radical and morally important of the differences among human dispositions, he would probably take occasion to contrast the selfish and sympathetic man. It is, therefore, somewhat singular that the *former* answer should be ambiguous precisely in respect of the contrast pointed in the latter: that a "Utilitarian," in common usage, should nearly as often mean one who acts from self-interest as one who aims at the general good; and that in the writings of professed assailants, as well as professed defenders of Utilitarianism, the Egoistic and Altruistic principles should frequently appear inextricably blended, or at least indissolubly connected.

At the same time it is not difficult to find reasons for this close union between principles and systems from one point of view so antagonistic. In the first place, both are equally opposed to the "intuitional," or "common-sense" morality: and the alliances of doctrines as of nations are as often due to common enmity as to natural affinity. But, further, the systems of Epicurus and Bentham are essentially similar in being both *dependent* systems; that is, in prescribing actions as means to an end distinct from, and lying outside the actions; and

thus both consist of rules which are not absolute but relative, and only valid if they conduce to the end. Again, the ultimate end, or entity regarded as intrinsically good and desirable, is in both systems the same in quality, *i.e.*, pleasure, or, more strictly, the maximum of pleasure attainable, pains being subtracted. Besides, it is of course to a great extent true that the conduct recommended by Egoistic Hedonism coincides with that inculcated by Universalistic Hedonism (as for comparison's sake we may term Bentham's Utilitarianism). Though it is only in an ideal polity that "self-interest well understood" leads to the perfect discharge of all social duties, still, in a tolerably well-ordered community it prompts to the fulfilment of most of them, unless under very exceptional circumstances. And, on the other hand, a sincere Benthamite may fairly hold that his own happiness is that portion of the universal good which it is most in his power to promote, and which therefore is most especially entrusted to his charge. And the practical blending of the two systems is sure to go beyond their theoretical coincidence. It is much easier for a man to move in a sort of diagonal between egoistic and universalistic hedonism, than to be practically a consistent adherent of either. Few men are so completely selfish, whatever their theory of morals may be, as not occasionally to seek the general good of some smaller or larger community from natural sympathetic impulse unsupported by Epicurean calculation. And probably still fewer are so resolutely unselfish as never to find all men's good in their own with rather too ready conviction.

In spite of all this, the distinction between one's own happiness and that of people in general is so natural and obvious, and so continually forced upon our attention by the circumstances of life, that some other reason is required to explain the persistent confusion between the systems that respectively adopt either end as furnishing the right and reasonable standard for each individual's conduct. And such a reason is found in the theory of human action propounded by Bentham, and, generally speaking, maintained by his disciples. Though ethically Epicureanism and Benthamism may be viewed as standing in polar opposition, psychologically Bentham is in fundamental agreement with Epicureans. He holds that a man ought to aim at the maximum felicity of men in general; but he holds, also, that he always does aim at what appears to him his own maximum felicity—that he cannot help doing this—that this is the way his volition inevitably acts. Bentham takes every opportunity of putting these two propositions with characteristic sharpness and clearness. "The greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question is the only right and proper and universally desirable end of human action in every situation." But "in the general tenor of life,

in every human breast, self-regard is predominant ;” or, more explicitly, “on the occasion of every act he exercises, every human being is led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own greatest happiness, whatsoever be the effect of it in relation to the happiness of other similar beings, any or all of them taken together.” He goes on to refer those who doubt to the “existence of the human species as being itself a proof, and a conclusive one.”

Hence if self-interest be not the “right and proper end of action,”* it is at any rate not wrong or improper, because it is inevitable. If Bentham is asked, “Why then do you inveigh (as you certainly do with much bitterness and emphasis) against lawyers and statesmen who seek their own interest when it unfortunately happens to diverge from the public interest?” his answer is ready and clear: “I do so with a view of removing the divergence; by my own disapprobation and the disapprobation of all I can persuade to sympathize with me, I would supply the force that is wanting to turn the wills of these public servants in the direction of public duty.” If he is asked again, “But when you concern yourself about the public good, and call it the right and proper end of action, do not you recognize a principle of duty, obedience to which you prefer to your own pleasure?” he answers unhesitatingly, “No I concern myself about the public good, *because in me selfishness has taken the form of public spirit*, and when I call it the proper end, I mean that I wish all other men to take it for such, with a view to its attainment, with which the attainment of my own greatest happiness is bound up.”

There is, therefore, in Bentham’s mind no confusion and no logical connection between his psychological generalization and his ethical assumption. But it has been so common among moralists of all schools to identify the natural and the ideal, and to argue from what men universally or normally do to what they ought to do, that it is not surprising that a utilitarian of Bentham’s school should be thought to approve of the egoism which he accepts as inevitable, and in some way to base upon it his universalistic hedonism. And we find that the latest expositor of utilitarianism, Mr. Mill, does try to establish a logical connection between the psychological and ethical principles, which he holds in common with Bentham, and to convince his readers that because each man naturally seeks his own happiness, therefore he ought to seek the happiness of other people.

* As far as I am aware, this term is never applied to it in works written by Bentham himself. In the Deontology, and elsewhere where the composition is due to Dumont, we find a loose and vague syncretion of Egoistic and Universalistic Hedonism, which it is impossible to attribute to so exact and coherent a thinker.

Now, it is my object to prove that this psychological generalization is in no important sense true. In so doing I do not wish to attack the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mr. Mill, with which I in the main agree, but to disentangle it from the egoistic hedonism with which their theory of human action continually causes it to be confounded.

It will be as well to quote the words in which Mr. Mill states the theory. "It will hardly," he expects, "be disputed that 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:" or, still more precisely, "we desire a thing *in proportion* as the idea of it is pleasant." It is important to notice the italicized words. For it must be admitted that if we leave them out, the experience of mankind would *prima facie* confirm Mr. Mill's assertion. Most men would say that whatever they desired was always something which was pleasant in prospect. I shall presently argue that even this on closer examination seems to be an inexact account of consciousness. But few would assert that what they *most* desired was always that which they thought would give them most pleasure. It would be generally allowed that men not only desire, but are actually impelled to do what (even in the moment of yielding to the impulse) they know will cause them more pain than pleasure on the whole. "Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor" is as applicable to the Epicurean as to anyone else. If any evidence is needed of this, I cannot do better than quote Mr. Mill himself.* "Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures . . . They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good." I confess that I cannot reconcile this sentence with the one previously quoted from the same author. If we always desire more strongly what is in idea most pleasant, how can we choose what we know to be the less valuable pleasure?

It may be thought, however, that this is an exceptional case, offering an interesting psychological puzzle; but that it still remains true that the ordinary, normal phenomenon in the action of men is that each individual seeks his own greatest apparent pleasure; and that, in order to prove that the greatest pleasure is intrinsically desirable, we only require the proposition that the greatest pleasure is *ordinarily* desired, not that it is *always* so.

Before we examine this more qualified assertion, it will be as well to define our terms as clearly as possible. In the passage which I first quoted, Mr. Mill goes on to say that "desiring a thing, and finding it pleasant, are, in strictness of language, two modes of naming

* "Utilitarianism," C. 2. p. 14 (of 3rd edition).

the same psychological fact." If this be the case, it is hard to see how the assertion we are discussing requires to be determined by "practised self-consciousness and self-observation;" as the denial of it would involve a contradiction in terms. The truth is that there is an ambiguity in the word pleasure, which has always tended seriously to confuse the discussion of this question.* By pleasure we commonly mean an agreeable sensation not necessarily connected with desire or volition, as it may arise from external causes without having been foreseen or desired at all. But when we speak of a man doing something at his own "pleasure," or as he "pleases," we signify the mere fact of choice or preference; the mere determination of the will in a certain direction. Now, if by "pleasant" we mean that which influences choice, exercises a certain attractive force on the will, it is not a psychological truth, but a tautological assertion, to say that we desire a thing in proportion as it appears "pleasant." But if we take "pleasure" to mean "agreeable sensation," it then becomes a really debateable question whether our active impulses are always consciously directed towards the attainment of agreeable (or the avoidance of disagreeable) sensations as their end. And this is what we must understand Mr. Mill to consider "so obvious, that it will hardly be disputed."

It is rather curious to find that the best-known of English moralists regards the exact opposite of what Mr. Mill thinks so obvious, as being not merely a universal fact of our conscious experience, but even a necessary truth. Butler distinguishes, as is well known, "self-love," or the impulse towards our own pleasure from "particular movements towards particular external objects—honour, power, the harm or good of another;" the actions proceeding from which are "no otherwise interested than as every action of every creature must from the nature of the case be; for no one can act but from a desire, or choice, or preference of his own." Such particular passions or appetites are, he goes on to say, "*necessarily presupposed by the very idea of an interested pursuit; since the very idea of interest or happiness consists in this, that an appetite or affection enjoys its object.*" We could not pursue pleasure at all, unless we had desires for something else than pleasure; for pleasure consists in the satisfaction of just these extra-regarding impulses.

Butler has clearly over-stated his case; † for many pleasures (as was just remarked) occur to us without any relation to previous

* The confusion occurs in the most singular form in Hobbes, who actually identifies Pleasure and Appetite, "this motion in which consisteth pleasure, is a solicitation to draw near to the thing that pleaseth."

† The same argument is put in a more guarded, and, I think, unexceptionable form by Hutcheson.

desires, and it is quite *conceivable* that our appetitive consciousness should consist entirely of impulses towards such pleasures as these. But taken as a mere statement of actual fact, his doctrine faithfully represents a great, probably the greater part of our experience. Throughout the whole of our appetitive life we may distinguish (primary) *extra-regarding* impulses, desires of some end other than our own sensations, from secondary, reflexive, self-regarding impulses towards the pleasure which attends the fulfilment of the former.

I will begin with the appetites of hunger and thirst, because it is important to show that there is no difference between "sensual" and "intellectual" impulses as regards the point in question.

Hunger and thirst are impulses, due to bodily needs of food and drink representing themselves in consciousness. Their objects are respectively food and drink, not the pleasure that we shall feel while the food is being eaten and the water drunk.

It is, no doubt, true that appetite makes us regard food as pleasant, and is frequently and naturally accompanied with anticipation of the pleasure of eating; and further, that in proportion as the desire is strong, the anticipated pleasure appears great. These undeniable facts render the proposition which I am combating plausible, so that it requires careful introspective observation to convince us of its unsoundness. But I think such observation will show that conscious anticipation of pleasure is by no means an inseparable concomitant of appetite; and that, even when it exists, it is not its object. We may have a secondary desire of this pleasure along with the primary appetite, but the two are not to be identified. This statement I must again guard by admitting that the analysis which distinguishes the two is not applicable everywhere. Very often they are indistinguishably blended; and, as the evolution of consciousness is always from the vague to the definite, it is, perhaps, most exact to say that, in the earliest phase of any desire, the strictly extra-regarding impulse is not yet "differentiated" (as Mr. Spencer would say) from the strictly self-regarding. Still this differentiation soon takes place, and there are many occasions when we can quite clearly distinguish the two elements by the different actions which they respectively prompt. For as the pleasure depends to a great extent, as Butler says (though not entirely), on the strength of the appetite: the desire of the pleasure prompts men not only to gratify, but to stimulate, the appetite. The gourmand, who takes a walk in order to enjoy his dinner, is impelled by one sensual impulse to aim at producing another: here, at least, we are in no danger of confounding the two.

Again, let us examine a class of pleasures which occupy a very important place—according to some judges, the most important—in our sensitive existence: the pleasures of *pursuit*. These illustrate

peculiarly well the difference between the extra-regarding and self-regarding impulses, and also the dependence of pleasure on desire, instead of *vice versâ*. Take, for example, the favourite amusement of rich Englishmen. What is the motive that impels a man to fox-hunting? It is not the pleasure of catching the fox. Nobody, before entering on the chase, represents to himself the killing of the fox as a source of gratification, apart from the eagerness produced by pursuit. It is upon this eagerness that the pleasure depends; the desire, stimulated to a strange intensity by vehement action, is the prior fact; and the pleasure arising when the desire is gratified is proportioned to the pre-existing desire. It will be said, however, that what the fox-hunter desires is, not to kill the fox, but to enjoy the pursuit. And, no doubt, this is his rational motive, that, in a tranquil state of his mind, initiates the whole series of actions. But the peculiarity of the case is that of these pleasures at which he rationally aims, the irrational desire to catch the fox is an essential condition. Before we can enjoy pursuing, we must temporarily want to catch—want it very vehemently and absorbingly. Hence the often-noted paradox which such activities present to the prudential reason: we cannot attain the prudentially rational end of maximum pleasure without exciting what are now* highly irrational impulses.

Another very important observation suggests itself in connection with these latter pleasures. In the case previously discussed, although we could distinguish appetite from the desire of the pleasures consisting in the satisfaction of appetite, there appeared no incompatibility between the two. The fact that the gourmand is dominated by the desire of the pleasures of eating in no way impedes the development in him of the appetite which is a necessary condition of these pleasures. But when we turn to the pleasures of the chase, we seem to perceive this incompatibility to a certain extent. In all forms of pursuit a certain enthusiasm is necessary to obtain full enjoyment. A man who enters on it in too epicurean a temper, thinking too much of the pleasure, does not catch the full spirit of the chase; his eagerness never gets just the sharpness of edge which imparts to the pleasure its highest zest and flavour. Here comes into view what we might call the fundamental paradox of hedonism, that the self-regarding impulse, if too predominant, defeats its own end. This effect is not visible, or at any rate is scarcely visible in the case of purely sensual pleasures; and also where there is a very keen, natural susceptibility in any direction, the operation of the general

* I do not enter into the history of these impulses. In dealing with questions of which the decision depends, as Mr. Mill says, on "practised self-consciousness and self-observation, assisted by observation of others," it seems to me important to put carefully aside the necessarily hypothetical method of historical psychology.

law is counteracted. Hence we see, first, why epicureanism has always had, practically, in ordinary minds, a tendency to sensualism, which it certainly has not theoretically, because sensual pleasures are least of all diminished by directly pursuing them; and, secondly, why it has not had this tendency in philosophic minds, because in them the intellectual impulse is so strong originally as to resist the corrosive effect of the epicurean principle. But of a great part of our more refined enjoyments, intellectual and emotional, it seems true to say that in order to attain them, at any rate in their best form, the direction of our impulse must be objective, extra-regarding, not fixed upon our own sensations as its end. The activities upon which the pleasures attend seem to require a certain self-abandonment, incompatible with the conscious predominance of self-love. For example, the pleasures of thought and study (which the materialist Hobbes declares to be "far exceeding all carnal delights") can only be enjoyed by those who have an ardour of curiosity which carries the mind temporarily away from self and its sensations. In all kinds of Art, again, the exercise of the creative faculty is attended by intense and exquisite pleasures; but in order to get them, one must forget them; the gaze of the artist is always said to be rapt and fixed upon his ideal of beauty. Still more clearly does the law appear when we contemplate the sympathetic activities and susceptibilities. Even Professor Bain admits that the desire to give pleasure to, and remove pain from, others constitutes an exception to his general theory that each individual's volition is determined by his own pleasures and pains, actual or ideal; and it is upon the existence of this strictly unselfish impulse that the much-commended pleasures of benevolence depend.

So far I have insisted on the felt incompatibility of the self-regarding and extra-regarding impulses only as a means of proving their essential distinctness. I do not wish to overstate it, as it has been not unfrequently overstated by the anti-hedonistic moralists who have been perfectly right in drawing attention to it. I believe that in the commonest state of our activity the incompatibility is only momentary, and does not prevent a real harmony from being attained by means of a sort of alternating rhythm of the two impulses in consciousness. Desire is, I think, not ordinarily a conscious impulse towards pleasure; but where there is strong desire in any direction, there is commonly keen susceptibility to the corresponding pleasures; and the most devoted enthusiast is sustained in his work by the recurrent consciousness of such pleasures. But it is important to point out that the familiar and obvious instances of real conflict between self-love and some extra-regarding impulses are not paradoxes and puzzles to be explained away, but occasional phenomena,

which the analysis of our appetitive consciousness in the normal state, when there is no such conflict, would lead us to expect. Such conflict is generically the same, from a psychological point of view, whatever be the quality of the impulse which comes into collision with self-love; but the very important distinction introduced when we apply the ethical notions "higher" and "lower," and consider some impulses superior, others inferior in grade to self-love, has caused this resemblance to be overlooked. In the case of the appetites we consider (as Butler says) that self-love has a natural claim to rule; and if, yielding to a sensual impulse we take the course of action which is attended with less pleasure on the whole,* we condemn ourselves afterwards. But a similar result may occur in the case of a higher impulse, the subordination of which to self-love is not equally recognised by common sense; this involves us in a certain perplexity, which however is not due to any psychological anomaly but purely ethical, because the conduct appears to us in a certain sense irrational, and yet we do not condemn it. Let us represent to ourselves a case in detail. Suppose a man to have been for some time under the influence of a ruling passion of a noble kind: love of truth, love of beauty, or personal affection, or devotion to a cause, or desire to achieve any particular laudable end. For some time, perhaps, he has been borne along by a feeling in which the selfish and unselfish elements are not yet distinguished: he could not tell if asked whether he did what he was doing from a disinterested impulse or because he found his pleasure in it. But suddenly this passion or enthusiasm is thrown by circumstances into collision with other impulses and needs: the man is thus put into the attitude of prudential reflection, and finds, on estimation of probable resulting pleasures and pains, that the course of action to which his habitual impulse tends is distinctly opposed to the judgment of self-love. In fact, his enthusiasm demands a sacrifice; and he is at once able to distinguish clearly the proper external object of the impulse from the pleasure which normally attends its pursuit and attainment. He can ask the two distinct questions, "Is the sacrifice intrinsically worth making?" and "Will it repay me?" He is conscious that he can answer the second question in the negative, and yet the first in the affirmative. He can say, "It will not repay me, but it is worth it, and it shall take place."

I have been describing a phenomenon of by no means unfrequent occurrence even outside the sphere of properly moral impulses. But

* The victorious sensual impulse in this case is in general consciously directed towards pleasure; and the case is one of preference of a less pleasure to a greater, not of some external object to pleasure. Still it equally constitutes an exception to Mr. Mill's supposed universal law that desire is always proportioned to anticipated pleasure.

it is no doubt most common in the case of these latter; the sacrifice is generally demanded in the name of what is right, reasonable, virtuous. And here I would again appeal to Mr. Mill himself as a witness on my side; referring in this case to his Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy. Readers may recall the passage in which he speaks of the supposed religious duty of worshipping as "good" a Deity to whom the term is not applicable in any intelligible sense; rather than do so, he says, "If such a Being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go." The case is of course purely hypothetical, being intended as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the belief in an incognizable God. But a hypothetical instance does just as well as a real one to test a principle; and this supplies me with just the hypothesis most perfectly adapted to illustrate my view. Mr. Mill avows, we may say, a hypothetical preference for hell.* Now he can hardly maintain that such preference would involve "finding hell most pleasant," even in idea; as it is understood in the very notion of hell, that it is more painful to be there than to be anywhere else. He therefore recognizes the conceivability of a practical impulse tending in the direction of maximum infelicity; and even asserts that such an impulse could and would determine his volition.

To sum up, in contravention of the doctrine that our conscious active impulses are always directed towards the production of agreeable sensations in ourselves, I would maintain that we find everywhere in consciousness extra-regarding impulse, directed towards something that is not pleasure; that in many cases this impulse is so far incompatible with the self-regarding that the two do not easily coexist in the same moment of consciousness; and that more occasionally (but by no means rarely) the two come into irreconcilable conflict, and prompt to opposite courses of action. And this incompatibility (though it is important to notice it in other instances) is no doubt specially prominent in the case of the impulse towards the end which competes in ethical controversy with pleasure—the love of virtue for its own sake, or desire to do what is right as such, which in the view of stoicism is essential to right conduct.

It may be said that whatever be the case with our present adult consciousness, our original impulses were all directed towards pleasure, and that any impulses otherwise directed are derived from these by "association of ideas." I do not think this can be proved; and the results of observation, as far as we can carry it, seem to tend in the opposite way; as preponderant objectivity seems characteristic of the earlier stages of our consciousness, and the subjective attitude does

* Mr. Mill, no doubt, draws a distinction between Desire and Will. But I think he means to imply, in the case supposed, a preference as well as a determination.

not become habitual till later in life. But supposing the assertion were proved, it would have little bearing on the present question. The Hedonist says, "I prove Pleasure to be intrinsically desirable by showing that all men actually do desire it." It is answered that all men do not now desire pleasure, but rather other things: some in particular having impulses towards virtue, which may and do conflict with their desire for their own pleasure. It is no reply to this to say that all *once* desired pleasure, except on the assumption that our earlier impulses have a prerogative in validity over our later. But no one appeals from the artist's sense of beauty to the child's; nor are the truths of the higher mathematics thought to be less certainly true, because they can be only apprehended by a highly developed intellect. In fact, this disposition to attribute some strange importance and special authority to what was *first* felt or thought belongs to an antiquated point of view. In politics we have quite abandoned the idea that even if we could establish irrefragably the original condition of the human family, it would at all help to determine jural obligations in our existing societies. The corresponding opinion still lingers in psychology and ethics, but it may be expected not to linger very long; as the assumption that our earliest consciousness is most trustworthy is not only baseless, but opposed to the current theories of the Evolution and Progress.

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