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## Ethics of Happiness

Christianity teaches us that pleasure (at least worldly pleasure) is something to be on one's guard against at all times. Pleasure which stems from the world, whether it is a pleasure of the senses or a pleasure derived from one's position or situation in the world, is a distraction from a higher good. In essence, ethical right is entirely divorced from pleasure, if not opposed to it.

Christianity also holds that the concentration on the self is effort misdirected. One should be forever looking toward God, to the neglect of the self and one's situation in this world. Even in Calvinism, personal success is a side-effect of a Godly life, and the achievement of the former should not be the impetus for the pursuit of the latter.

John Stuart Mill and Joseph Butler disagree with this understanding of Christian ethics. For Mill, pleasure is not only central to ethical principles, but pleasure itself, in its various forms, is the ultimate good. Butler argues that the love of the self is in agreement with Christian ethics and that effort spent on the furthering of the true nature of the self is one of the surer paths to right actions.

In this essay, I want to explore the personal pursuit of happiness and its interaction with ethics, in the context of stoic Christian ethics, Mill's Utilitarianism (New York: Batnam

Books, 1993), and Butler's Fifteen Sermons (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1860). I will look both at the understanding of happiness under these various viewpoints, its effects on human beings, and the what this suggests about doing good and leading an ethical life.

All three ethical systems are concerned with the fulfillment of some human capacity. For the stoics, this capacity lies wholly in the reasoning faculty; the stoics are concerned with unchaining the mind from the physical world which is currently crippling it. Utilitarianism is concerned with the fulfillment, as much as possible, of the human capacity to experience pleasure, by seeking higher pleasures which are better pleasures.

Butler's ethics require more explanation. Butler uses Aristotle's concept of the true nature of an thing to justify the pursuit of self-love. Aristotle believed that each thing had a true and "most appropriate" nature which it was trying to achieve. An acorn's true nature is found in the oak tree that grows from it. Similarly, human beings have a true nature, and according to Butler that true nature has at its core our social nature. Although a human being may act differently from their true nature, it will be, by definition, unnatural, and it will feel thus.

None of these fulfillments is inherently in conflict with the others, although other aspects of the philosophies they are part of impose conflicts upon them. For Butler, the reason that self-love is a path to the good is because he claims that the natural fulfillment of self-love agrees with the good of the entire community of that self, which agrees with Mill's concept of good as good for all society. Both Butler and Mill heartily claim the fulfillment of the

mind as a part of their philosophies, although they disagree that detaching it from the world is the way to do this.

The connection of the pursuit of happiness with Mill and stoic philosophies is obvious. For Mill, the pursuit of happiness for the world (not just the self) is the central method to doing right. Stoic philosophers see this pursuit as a path to the impairment of one's faculty for discerning right from wrong.

Butler is primarily concerned with self-love, but his conception of self-love is just an extension of the pursuit of happiness. The happiness that Butler acknowledges is something more specific than Mill's pleasure (it is closer to Mill's higher pleasures). Certain pursuits that one might be inclined to follow disagree with one's conscience and one's nature as a social animal. These are not included in the proper, or "natural", pursuit of happiness because in following them one fails some part of complete self-love. Butler expresses the connection between self-love and happiness when he notes that "self-love, as well as the appetites and passions themselves, may put us upon making use of the proper methods of obtaining that pleasure and avoiding that pain" (29).

It would be wrong to say that Mill and Butler are more interested in the workings physical world than in the those of the mind or spirit.

Mill draws the distinction between lower and higher pleasures. Lower pleasure are typically the pleasures of the senses, immediate and tangible. Higher pleasures invariably engage

the mind and the ability of human beings to reason, and they stem from them. He notes that “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” (145). Mill argues that higher pleasures have more sway in how people should act because those who spend more time seeking the lower pleasures are generally those who do not know the higher pleasures to see their folly.

Butler has a distinction between unnatural happiness (which is happiness which stems from passion and immediate gratification) and natural happiness, which stems from actions which agree with the whole self. Butler notes “if passion prevails over self-love, the consequent action is unnatural; but if self-love prevails over passion, the action is natural” (44). Also suggesting that Butler’s natural happiness is similar to Mill’s higher pleasures, Butler claims that “our real nature leads us to be influenced in some degree by reflection and conscience” (45).

Even the stoic do not believe that happiness is to be unilaterally avoided, and they have a distinction between happiness that coincides with the mental or spiritual growth of a person and that which coincides with his fall toward a more physically based existence. There should be joy in doing mental exercises and in worshiping God (for the Christian stoics). However, happiness should not be pursued for its own sake. Butler to some extent agrees. Happiness is not the “point”, although when happiness is pursued our natural ability to distinguish right from wrong and follow right and scorn wrong becomes more pronounced.

Mill acknowledges lower pleasures of the flesh and higher pleasures of the mind, but it seems like the stoics are seeking even higher pleasures of the spirit. Perhaps there can be even greater "pleasures" which are only reachable when the soul transcends both the body and the mind. I mean here by soul only that aspect of the self which is not attached to all of the aspects which make up the self.

It is interesting that this distinction, which generally seems to be between the happiness which comes from the world and the happiness which is created in the mind. In one case the individual is passive and being acted upon, in the other case the happiness stems from the effort of the individual and it would cease without the individual's constant involvement.

There are also important differences in what the different philosophies consider happiness to be. Butler thinks of happiness as a passive or ambient thing. Life under certain conditions (the conditions associated with the following of human nature) is a happiness life. Mill thinks of happiness as something one does; it is characterized by the activities which bring it about. The stoics view happiness as a burdensome entity. Happiness comes along with some things and not with others as though it were tied to them, and it is something to pay little attention and certainly not to spend time on.

In other words, happiness for Butler is a adjective, for Mill is a verb, and for the stoics it is a noun. Each of these views has its merits. Another view of happiness is that in a given context it will start as a verb, alive only because it is in action; progress to a noun that can easily be lost, and finally become an adjective, imbuing the context with it.

The connections between happiness and ethics are different for each philosophy. For Mill, the pursuit of personal happiness is an end to itself, but it is a lesser end than happiness on larger scales. That is, the path of happiness for everyone is the path of righteousness.

For Butler, the human being's nature as a social animal with various faculties for morality, such as conscience and compassion, make the pursuit of personal happiness naturally continuous with the pursuit of all other ethical goods. He claims, "Conscience and self-love, if we understand our true happiness, always lead us in the same way" (53). "We were made for society, and to promote the happiness of it; as that we were intended to take care of our own life, and health, and private good." In other words, happiness is not the same as the good, but the pursuit of happiness will result in doing good.

Doing good is like any other project and requires attention and thereby passion (to some extent) to do it. Mill thought that good would be done largely by habit if his scheme for educating children into associating good for themselves with good for all.

Both Mill and Butler consider the tendency of people who should know better (who know of pleasures on both sides) to occasionally choose the lower pleasure. Butler laments "How many instances, in which persons manifestly go through more pains and self-denial to gratify a vicious passion than would have been necessary to the conquest of it!" (51). Mill comments on those who "pursue sensual indulgences to the injury, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good."

Mill attributes this weakness to “infirmity of character” and Butler in many ways agrees. A particular pursuit of happiness most can stem from many places. Butler claims that it should stem from a person’s nature, as they reflect on what exactly that nature is. Mill claims that the pursuit reflects the experience of the person, and if it is a pursuit of lower pleasures when the person’s experience includes higher pleasures, it is because the experience of higher pleasures has not become internalized into the person’s character— that is, their conception of their own nature has not grown to encompass these new experiences.

Neither author is particularly concerned with the effects of happiness on the self. Mill mentions how delicate the appreciation for the happiness of the mind, like “a very tender plant” (148), but he does not speculate that physical pleasure itself could be a danger to the plant. He acknowledges that purely physical pleasure is appealing, even though it is less “worthwhile” than mental pleasure, but attributes the appeal to a conquerable weakness of individuals, rather than pleasure itself.

Perhaps happiness is a distraction, and that it erodes our ability to seek higher pleasures. However, without happiness, a person finds in everything else a distraction. The objection is not that it would not be possible to convince someone to seek something other than happiness. When an intelligent being does anything worthwhile, it is done by actively exerting energy and attention toward it. For that to happen, their spirit must be involved and their desires must be involved (specifically, their desire to pursue the path in question).

Butler is not saying that the reasoning faculty should not be used for the discerning of truth.

However, he does claim that it is most effectively used in conjunction with the sensing faculty.

Butler explains his objection to the stoics thus:

God Almighty is, to be sure, unmoved by passion or appetite, unchanged by affection: but then it is to be added, that he neither sees, nor hears, nor perceives things by any senses like ours; but in a manner infinitely more perfect. Now, as it is an absurdity almost too gross to be mentioned, for a man to endeavor to get rid of his senses, because the Supreme Being discerns things more perfectly without them; it is a real, though not so obvious an absurdity, to endeavor to eradicate the passions he has given us, because he is without them. (67)

The senses are one source of truth about the world, however it is the assumption of science that the truths obtained through the combination of the mind and the senses are more significant than those obtainable by the senses alone (assuming that truth about the world is possible at all). The stoic claim, however, is that the mind is the ultimate source of truth. If the stoics are correct, then the method by which "the Supreme Being discerns things" is much closer to the way that the mind discerns things rather than how the senses do, so if any truth is to be discerned, it is better that it be done so with the mind and not the senses.

Another possibility is that pleasure itself is a kind of currency which allows people to do things. For example, after solving a jigsaw puzzle, and being pleased at finally seeing the completed picture, one might not be interested in solving additional jigsaw puzzles, but one will (by my intuition) be inclined to attack new and different problems.



Passion seems to be another necessary ingredient for approaching life with effort and gumption. Passion or excitement for something will cause us to take action. Tranquility encourages us to maintain a current state. Butler says that “reason alone, whatever any one may wish, is not in reality a sufficient motive of virtue in such a creature as man,” but we also need passions (67). Passion (from the root passive) is a state of being acted upon by something else, but it seems necessary for action.

A stoic objection to Butler’s ideas, even if human being’s social nature as Butler understands it is given, is that self-love is not an effective path to the human being’s true nature. Human beings are distinguished from animals by their capacity to reason, and this capacity lies at the center of our nature. Contemplation upon this and contemplation upon God, in whose image we are reputed to be made, is the true path to our true nature.

The pursuit of happiness is clearly not inherently ethical. There are many forms that that pursuit could take which would result in evil. Some sort of restriction must be placed on the pursuit of happiness, although that restriction may be already ingrained in what we get joy from (Butler claims this is the case).

Pleasures grow old, and the pursuit of pleasure is the pursuit of diversity in sensations (both mental and physical). If one’s only goal is to pursue pleasure and one has not internalized or acknowledged the distinction between higher and lower pleasures (and it is not necessarily intuitive), then one is bound to pursue the higher and lower pleasures equally. In so doing, if the appreciation for the higher pleasures is as tender a thing as Butler claims then the

equality will turn toward an inequality in the lower pleasure's favor.

Although I disagree with Mill's all-encompassing view of the good of the pursuit of happiness, I agree with his understanding of happiness. In the form where it is most useful for doing good, happiness is a verb. When happiness is characterized by activity rather than passivity, it is under the control and the design of the person experiencing it. Although it should not be pursued, when encountered, it should not be ignored.

Mill shows us that the pursuit of happiness is a convenient workhorse for establishment of principles of ethics, and Butler shows us that it is likely to follow the same path as the good. However, it is a workhorse and not a master, and to pursue it as one would a desired goal is to give it a position of dominance that it should not have. It is appropriate for a person to appreciate happiness, but happiness alone cannot be an ethical end to itself.