

Connections between Mill and Aristotle: Happiness and Pleasure

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In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill asserts that the principles of utilitarianism are not far-fetched or esoteric but are the roots of previous ethical systems. He remarks, “It would . . . be easy to show that whatever steadiness or consistency these [past] moral beliefs have attained, has been mainly due to the tacit influence of a standard not recognized,” that standard being the Greatest Happiness Principle (Mill 19, 51). Though Mill confidently proclaims that utilitarianism is embedded in other ethical systems, not all may agree, and some may dispute how much utilitarianism pervades other systems. I will examine the similarities between Mill’s *Utilitarianism* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, specifically analyzing the concepts of happiness and pleasure according to each philosopher. To do so, I will both draw from Aristotle and Mill scholars, such as Kraut, Bostock, Crisp, and Frede, and discuss the main differences between Mill’s and Aristotle’s notions of happiness and pleasure. Through this survey, I will show that, though Mill’s and Aristotle’s views of happiness and pleasure differ in many aspects, some striking similarities exist, thus lessening the gulf between these philosophers. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin, Hackett Publishing Company, 1985.

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Happiness

Foremost, while Mill's work was not translated, Aristotle's certainly was, and this introduces some major differences between their views of happiness. Although the Greek word *eudaimonia* is often translated as "happiness" and both philosophers view happiness as the best good, Aristotle sees happiness as an activity only partially related to pleasure—while Mill sees happiness as a feeling very closely related to pleasure. Additionally, Aristotle's "happiness" is far more connected to virtue than Mill's.

Eudaimonia is better translated as "flourishing" than as "happiness," for this more fully encapsulates what Aristotle means when he claims that "the best good is happiness" (Kraut; Aristotle 15). He is not just referring to a feeling, but rather an activity (Aristotle 17). As David Bostock notes, *eudaimonia* "is essentially something long-term," and because "one is either eudaimōn or not, absolutely," it best "connotes overall success and prosperity and achievement" (11). Thus, *eudaimonia* cannot merely be a feeling, for feelings are temporary, generally lasting no more than a period of weeks, but *eudaimonia* will concern one's overall well-being. Furthermore, *eudaimonia* is not directly equated with pleasure (Aristotle 407). Despite the average man's conception of happiness, Aristotle's "happiness" does not mean "pleasure." Though pleasure may be considered good, it is not "the good . . . at which everything aims," for it is not always the most choiceworthy (Aristotle 1, 273, 276). Moreover, *eudaimonia* is very linked with virtue. Aristotle defines *eudaimonia* as "the soul's activity that expresses virtue," so virtue is core to *eudaimonia* (17).

This surface view of *eudaimonia* contrasts starkly with Mill's overall conception of happiness; though it also places happiness as the highest good, it does not portray happiness as a long-term activity, and happiness is far more connected to pleasure and less connected to virtue. Mill claims that "there is in reality nothing desired except happiness," which would place happiness as the supreme good (84). However, Mill remarks that happiness cannot be a continuous experience, but is instead moments of great enjoyment (60). In other words, happiness, according to Mill, is more of a feeling than an activity. In addition, Mill defines happiness as "pleasure, and the absence of pain," which denotes a much stronger connection between pleasure and happiness than Aristotle is willing to make (Mill 55, Aristotle 273). Furthermore, while Aristotle's definition of happiness places special importance on virtue, Mill's focuses on pleasure and the absence of pain, which indicates that Aristotle is more concerned with virtues than Mill. Because of these differences, Mill's "happiness" and Aristotle's "*eudaimonia*" are not compatible—at least not at first blush (Aristotle 17).

Interestingly, Mill's "happiness" and Aristotle's "happiness" have some similar features, giving some merit to Mill's claim that his principles are embodied in other ethical systems. For example, both Aristotle and Mill believe that happiness includes other ends pursued for themselves. Additionally, although Aristotle places more emphasis on virtue than Mill, both believe that virtue is significantly related to happiness. These similarities indicate that these philosophers' views are not completely incompatible.

First, Aristotle notes that the highest good is complete, and thus *eudaimonia* can include other ends pursued for themselves. For a good to be complete, it must be desired enough to be chosen, and it must be chosen "because of itself, never because of something else" (Aristotle 14). Aristotle recognizes that some goods, such as pleasure and virtue, seem to be chosen for themselves, but they are not fully chosen for themselves. This paradox allows Aristotle to include other goods inside of *eudaimonia*. He states,

Honour [sic], pleasure, understanding, and every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves, since we would choose each of them even if it had no further result, but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, by contrast, no one ever chooses for their sake [meaning for the sake of these other goods], or for the sake of anything else at all. (Aristotle 14)

These other goods can be both ends in themselves and a means to happiness because *eudaimonia* "connotes overall success and prosperity and achievement" (Bostock 11). *Eudaimonia* can be compared to a road with several stops along the way, those stops being other goods that are ends in themselves (see fig. 1).

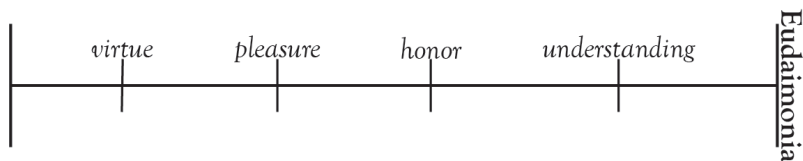


Figure 1. A representation of Aristotle's view of happiness.

One may be content to reach pleasure, for instance, and go no farther, for there is much good in pleasure. Other goods such as virtue, honor, and understanding are also worthy stopping places because of their inherent goodness. However, the road's true destination is *eudaimonia*, and if one desires the most good, then one must travel directly to *eudaimonia*, or must continue seeking the other goods for all his journey until he reaches the highest good. There is one notable problem with this analogy, mainly

that its simplicity may incorrectly imply a hierarchy, but it serves its main purpose, which is to demonstrate how something may be both an end and a means. In this kind of way, Aristotle believes that goods such as honor, pleasure, understanding, and virtue are sought for themselves, but they are also a part of *eudaimonia*.

Mill agrees that happiness includes other ends pursued for themselves. Though Mill holds that “there is in reality nothing desired except happiness,” he also believes that “the ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate” (82, 84). This allows Mill’s conception of happiness to not only include pleasure and the absence of pain, but also other goods such as music, health, and virtue (82-83). So far, this view is nearly consistent with Aristotle’s.

Aristotle and Mill diverge, however, upon *how* other goods with their own ends fit into happiness. Aristotle believes that the highest good should have certain qualities, such as completeness, self-sufficiency, and choice-worthiness, and since only *eudaimonia* fully fulfills all these qualifications, only it can be the highest good (14-15). As I have said above, the completeness of *eudaimonia* allows other goods, such as virtue, understanding, pleasure, and honor, to be a part of Aristotle’s “happiness.”

Mill takes a different approach to explain the relationship. He remarks that other goods are a part of happiness because of their intrinsic pleasure or exemption from pain. Music, for instance, has intrinsic pleasure, so it is a part of happiness (Mill 82). Virtue is likewise part of happiness because of its pleasure (Mill 84). Health, because of its exemption from pain, is also a part of happiness (Mill 82). Mill must connect all these goods back to pleasure, or exemption from pain, to fit them inside happiness because Mill defined happiness strictly as “pleasure, and the absence of pain” (55). Therefore, anything that is a part of happiness must be linked back to that definition. Aristotle does not need to do so, for his conception of happiness is not so focused upon pleasure. So, whereas Aristotle’s view of happiness can be understood in terms of a road that ends at *eudaimonia*, Mill’s view is better explained by a road with every stop accompanied by happiness (see fig. 2).

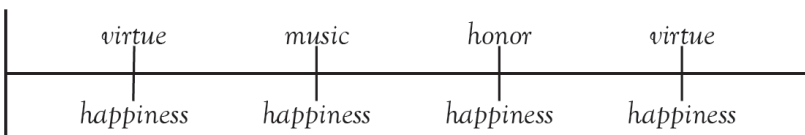


Figure 2. A representation of Mill’s view of happiness.

This analogy falters because it does not fully express how the goods in themselves are both parts of happiness and ends in themselves. However, it displays the main distinction between Mill's and Aristotle's views: Mill's "happiness," being a feeling, closely accompanies each good sought for itself, whereas Aristotle's "happiness" is not truly achieved until one has finished his or her life.

Second, in addition to including other ends inside happiness, both philosophers notably include virtue as a part of happiness, but for varied reasons. For Aristotle, his main definition of *eudaimonia* makes virtue consistent with happiness. He states, "our account agrees with those who say happiness is virtue {in general} or some {particular} virtue; for activity expressing virtue [i.e., *eudaimonia*] is proper to virtue" (Aristotle 20). If he were to claim that virtue was not a part of *eudaimonia*, he would make a gross contradiction, for his definition of happiness depends upon virtue.

Mill, on the other hand, includes virtue in happiness to explain how utilitarianism could swallow virtue ethics, thereby ranking utilitarianism as a competing ethical system. In his effort to show that happiness is the only thing desirable as an end, he must consider virtue as an opponent to his claim, for virtue ethicists see virtue as something to be sought for itself (Mill 82; Hursthouse and Pettigrove). To claim that virtue is not desirable as an end would be absurd, so he opts to agree that virtue is "desired disinterestedly, for itself" (Mill 82). Mill must then reconcile this with the Greatest Happiness Principle. This principle states that "pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things . . . are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and prevention of pain" (Mill 55). Since virtue is desired as its own end, it must then be a part of happiness, desired for its intrinsic pleasure. Mill believes that if virtue could be sought for itself but still be consistent with the rest of utilitarianism, then utilitarianism would be just as good, if not better, than the virtue ethics in his time.

Thus, Mill and Aristotle agree that happiness includes other goods sought for themselves and that virtue is a significant part of happiness. These agreements, Crisp argues, arise because Mill borrows some of Aristotle's ideas, and this borrowing may reveal not only why Aristotle's and Mill's views converge, but also why they diverge (Mill 133). Because Mill's "happiness" is more directly related to pleasure, his view is more restricted than Aristotle's, for Mill must connect every good back to pleasure or the exemption of pain. Aristotle, on the other hand, can give a more encompassing, long-term view of happiness, for pleasure is only considered one good among many.

Pleasure

Because Aristotle's *eudaimonia* is not directly equated to pleasure and Mill's "happiness" more closely connects to pleasure, some may overlook Mill's and Aristotle's agreements about pleasure. These philosophers have similar conceptions of pleasures in three ways: both agree on pleasure's importance as a moral criterion, though to different extents and for diverse reasons; both believe in different degrees of pleasures and that these variations result from the different purposes of creatures; and both discuss why people may pursue the lower pleasures instead of the higher ones.

First, both agree that pleasure is a significant element of morality, though Mill places more stress on this than Aristotle does. Though Aristotle regards pleasure as only a part of *eudaimonia*, he believes it is important because it provides motivation and heavily relates to the virtues and vices of character. "Pleasure," he remarks, "seems to be especially proper to our {animal} kind, and hence when we educate children we steer them by pleasure and pain" (Aristotle 266). Hence, pleasure (and its converse, pain) is particularly useful motivations because they are part of our base nature; we do not need special knowledge to be directed by pleasure or pain. Furthermore, he notes that pleasure can help one become a better person. He states, "Pleasure and pain extend through the whole of our lives, and are of great importance for virtue and the happy life, since people decide to do what is pleasant, and avoid what is painful" (Aristotle 266). Although pleasure is not the ultimate criterion for Aristotle, it is significant because it will indicate the state of a person, whether he be virtuous or not, and the virtue of a person is core to Aristotle's ethics (37).

For Mill, not only is pleasure supplementary to morality, but essential. Since Mill believes that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends upon its tendency to produce pleasure or lack of pain, pleasure is a key criterion for morality (55). Thus, for Mill, pleasure's importance is evident and straightforward.

Second, both philosophers believe that there are different degrees of pleasures, not all being the same worth. Aristotle's position is best illuminated by studying the Greek word for pleasure. Frede, an Aristotle expert, explains:

Just as in English, the Greek terms *hedone* and *lupe* are not names for simple phenomena. They encompass a wide field of psychological states. Pleasure and pain designate any kind of positive or negative type of sensation, perception, feeling, mood, or attitude. This enumeration indicates how wide a spectrum is covered by those two terms. It comprises simple pleasures like

munching a juicy apple, but also complex ones such as the enjoyment of a great work of art or the admiration of a morally outstanding action. The field covered by its counterpart, pain, is just as wide. (257–58)

The Greek word for pleasure denotes a spectrum of pleasures. This is significant because the word “pleasure” is sometimes crudely interpreted as just the base, animal pleasures. This segues nicely into Aristotle’s meaning for “pleasure,” yet he would add that not only are pleasures multifaceted, but the kinds of pleasure that a being can experience depend upon the creature’s function.

Aristotle distinguishes the pleasures that are proper to a creature based upon the creature’s function. He states, “each kind of animal seems to have its own proper pleasure, just as it has its own proper function; for the proper pleasure will be the one that corresponds to its activity” (Aristotle 280). So, according to Aristotle, since a human’s function of reason is not shared by other animals, then non-human animals will not have the same proper pleasure as humans do (16). Furthermore, not only would non-human animals not have the same proper pleasure as humans, but non-human animals would not remotely desire a human’s proper pleasure. Aristotle remarks that “an ass would choose chaff over gold, since asses find food pleasanter than gold” (280). Though Aristotle does not claim this, one may also assume that a human would not be content with chaff because its function is different than that of an ass; a human would seek for higher pleasures.

Mill also believes that pleasures have different degrees, some being less appropriate for humans than others. In one of his best-known quotes, he asserts, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (Mill 57). One would rather be a human dissatisfied than a satisfied pig because:

A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and is certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type [such as a pig]; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. (Mill 57)

Mill suggests that humans can experience higher pleasures and more exquisite pains because they have higher mental capacities than non-human animals, and it can be assumed that this is also because humans have a higher potential, or can accomplish more, than non-human animals. This is consistent with Aristotle’s views, except that while Mill claims humans would never want to settle for the pleasures of a non-human animal, Aristotle

states that non-human animals would not wish for a human's pleasures. Furthermore, Aristotle takes a step further than Mill by clarifying what makes human pleasures different from non-human pleasures. Aristotle claims that some pleasures are goods while others are conditionally good, and he then asserts that "it is these {conditional} pleasures that beasts and children pursue, while the intelligent person pursues painlessness in relation to these" (202). Thus, the pleasures that are unconditionally good belong to the beings of higher faculties.

Third, both Aristotle and Mill discuss why people may pursue the lower pleasures, despite knowing of the higher ones. Aristotle regards bodily pleasures, because they are not unconditionally good, as lower pleasures for humans. These bodily pleasures are pursued, Aristotle explains, "because they are intense, by people who are incapable of enjoying other pleasures" (205-206). So, people that cannot enjoy the higher pleasures may seek the lower ones because of their intensity. Furthermore, Aristotle notes that people incapable of higher pleasures addict themselves to the lower pleasures, which confine them even more to the lower pleasures. He explains:

At any rate, these people induce some kinds of thirst in themselves, which is blameless whenever the thirsts are harmless, but base whenever they are harmful. And they do this because they enjoy nothing else, and many people's nature makes the neutral condition [or the condition with neither pain nor pleasure] painful to them. (Aristotle 206)

As Aristotle notes, these people restrict themselves to the lower pleasures, first because they cannot experience any other, second because they would rather experience lower pleasures than the bleak experience of neither pleasure nor pain, and third because they addict themselves to the lower pleasures by constantly seeking them instead of "the neutral condition" (206).

Mill poses a similar cause for why people may pursue the lower pleasures, explaining that people become incapable of experiencing higher ones because of society's or their own occupations' influences. He foremost rebuts the claim that "those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher" and remarks that "before they devote themselves exclusively to one, they have already become incapable of the other" (Mill 58). This parallels Aristotle's view well, for Aristotle also believes that those who seek the lower pleasures are incapable of the higher. Mill then explains that people become incapable of higher pleasures because "the occupations to which

their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable [sic] to keeping that higher capacity [for experiencing higher pleasures] in exercise” (58). These people then addict themselves to the lower pleasures “because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones to which they are any longer capable of enjoying” (Mill 58). Whereas both Mill and Aristotle discuss why some may choose the lower pleasures and how they may become addicted to them, Mill goes a step further by explaining why one may become incapable of pursuing higher pleasures.

So, Aristotle and Mill see pleasure consistently in three ways: pleasure is an important moral criterion, it is not one-dimensional but has several degrees according to creatures’ functions, and the lower pleasures can be chosen over the higher pleasures if one becomes incapable of higher pleasures. Though Mill’s ethical system places more emphasis on the pleasures, these similarities are still notable, for it would be false to associate Aristotle’s “happiness” too much with virtue and not enough with pleasures. To do so would incorrectly isolate these two philosophers’ ethics, for it has been shown that they agree in several ways concerning pleasures and their role.

Conclusion

Those who overlook the similarities between Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Mill’s *Utilitarianism* miss an enriching experience. Though the surface view of these ethics provides mostly differences, a closer look indicates intricate similarities, leading to the conclusion that these ethical theories are not as isolated as some may believe. For example, the concepts of happiness and pleasure have similar features in both theories. If we can view not only the differences but also the resemblances between more ethical systems, then we can focus less on false dichotomies and more on actual dichotomies. For example, if someone finds the utilitarian perspective appealing, as it can be in cases like politics, then he need not worry if he can incorporate virtue, for virtue is not exclusive to Aristotle’s ethics. Giving these ethical systems more holistic and charitable views will allow for more meaningful ethical discussions, thereby furthering our pursuits of what it means to live the good life.

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