

POSITIVISM AND PLEASURE: UNDERSTANDING MILL'S MISSING EXPLANATION OF THE HIGHER PLEASURES IN *UTILITARIANISM*

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Abstract. Although the notion of the higher pleasures is central to John Stuart Mill's ethical hedonism, conspicuously absent from *Utilitarianism* is any substantive explanation of the nature of the higher pleasures, resulting in several interpretative difficulties including the charge that Mill's theory faces a dilemma that severely undercuts the consistency of his ethical theory. The mystery of why Mill would be so evasive in explaining the higher pleasures can be solved by analyzing the influence of Auguste Comte's Positivism on Mill – as well as the influence of Plato. I argue that because Auguste Comte harshly rejects the validity of claims regarding conscious intellectual states, it is plausible that Mill chooses not to reveal his understanding of the higher pleasures. And furthermore, Mill does this because, as is shown by his commentary on *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, he does in fact understand the higher pleasures as conscious intellectual states. I offer preliminary analysis of Mill's expanded view and show how it can resolve some interpretative problems introduced in *Utilitarianism*.

Keywords: John Stuart Mill; Auguste Comte; Plato; pleasure; hedonism

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to starting the research for this paper, my own cursory understanding of Mill's view of the higher pleasures was that they are conscious experiences that involved the intellect, and because the higher pleasures play such a central role in Mill's ethical theory, I expected he must have developed an interesting account of the nature of these higher pleasures. However, once I began to reread *Utilitarianism* with careful attention towards these matters, I was deeply disappointed. Mill's discussion of the higher pleasures in this text is opaque regarding the nature of these states, and his statements are frustratingly unhelpful, which raised for me a new question, the one that I explore in this paper: Why is Mill's discussion of the

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higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism* so uninformative and unsatisfying? Insight into the answer came when I investigated the influence of Auguste Comte's Positivism on Mill. The argument I make in this paper is that Comte's harsh rejection of the validity of evidence drawn from introspection on intellectual states leads Mill to avoid discussing the higher pleasures from the point of view of the conscious subject; instead, he describes the higher pleasures through externally observable phenomena, in line with the tenets of Positivism. This is because, as I will further argue, Mill's view is that the higher pleasures are conscious intellectual states, and so, if Mill were to have elucidated his understanding of the higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism*, his view would in fact conflict with Comte's positive philosophy.

In Section II, I present Mill's discussion of the higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism* and outline some of the interpretative problems that his very minimal discussion invites. Section III discusses Comte's rejection of the study of intellectual consciousness, as well as Mill's later responses to Comte's arguments, arguing that Mill's hesitancy to provide a substantive view of the higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism* can be explained by his desire not to endanger the reception of his moral theory by offending readers who were partial to Positivism. I then briefly discuss how Mill's competent judge argument parallels Plato's argument in *Republic* book IX in Section IV, revealing an additional influence on Mill's discussion of the higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism*. Finally, in Section V I present and analyze some of Mill's commentary on his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, showing how this commentary can provide insights into Mill's more substantive view of the higher pleasures, and demonstrating how this expanded view can help to solve interpretative difficulties that proceed from the evasive discussion of the higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism*.

II. MILL ON THE HIGHER PLEASURES IN UTILITARIANISM

I begin by examining a few key passages from *Utilitarianism*. First is Mill's response to the *philosophy of swine* objection, where his description of the higher pleasures offers some ambiguous insights regarding their nature:

To suppose that life has [...] no higher end than pleasure [...] they designate as utterly mean and groveling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine [...] When thus attacked the Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light, since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable [...] 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 conception of happiness. *Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites*; and, when once made conscious of them, do not regard any thing as happiness which does not include their

gratification [...] there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to *the pleasures of the intellect, of the feeling and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation.*¹ [emphasis added]

This passage introduces the higher pleasures, but fails to offer a clear interpretation of the difference in kind that makes the higher pleasures higher than the lower ones. The interpretations proposed below all seem applicable to the text above:

- 1) The higher pleasures are higher because they include the *higher faculties*
- 2) The higher pleasures are higher because they are of *higher value*
- 3) Both 1 and 2

Interpretation (1) is supported by the first sentence I italicized in Mill's quote and the beginning of the second; however, the end of the second italicized sentence supports interpretation (2). With both senses implied by the passage, it appears we could also infer interpretation (3). Consider how crucial it is for Mill to provide a satisfying account of the higher pleasures. He must be able to overcome the philosophy of swine objection so that his ethical theory will not be one that endorses a life of mere sensual indulgence. Presumably, a worthwhile ethical theory should be one that aligns with some of our intuitions about a moral life, such that it esteems virtuous action and promotes actions that serve the greater good rather than leading to the conclusion that the ethical ideal is an animalistic life in pursuit of selfish pleasure. Therefore, the entire success of Mill's ethical theory hinges on giving a satisfying account of a distinction between the lower and higher pleasures, and moreover, an account that justifies why we ought to prefer the higher pleasures *as pleasures*.

Mill offers more detail regarding this distinction between the pleasures in the following passage:

It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more *valuable* than others. It would be absurd, that while, in estimating all other things, *quality* is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.² [emphasis added]

Note here that Mill states there is a difference in *kind*, a difference in *quality*, and a difference in *value* between the higher and lower pleasures. One might expect that Mill would follow this statement with an explanation of these differences, but the ostensible explanation Mill provides is surprisingly unhelpful:

¹ John S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, London, Parker, Son, and Born, 1863, pp. 10–11.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 11–12.

If I am asked what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of them give a decided preference [for them, then] that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, 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, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality.³

Before discussing the content of this passage, I want to highlight some of the scholarship that has emerged in response to it. It has long been proposed that Mill faces a dilemma concerning why a competent judge chooses the higher pleasure.⁴ One possibility is that quality really reduces to quantity, such that the competent judge chooses the higher pleasure only because it is more quantitatively pleasurable. But if that is case, the qualitative distinction between the higher and lower pleasures is ultimately erased, and therefore Mill's hedonism is vulnerable to the philosophy of swine objection. The other possibility is that the judge chooses on the basis of something besides pleasure, i.e., some property that is responsible for the difference in quality. However, if the judge chooses on the basis of some property other than pleasure, then Mill is committed to a view that is not thoroughly hedonistic because hedonism requires that pleasure is the *only* property that is intrinsically valuable. I will refer to this as Mill's *hedonic dilemma*.

The passage starts off introducing the upcoming text as an explanation of the differences between higher and lower pleasures, and Mill even touts that the explanation he will give is the only possible answer. But the answer Mill offers explains very little of substance to the reader. His statements provide no explanation of the difference in kind, quality, or value between the higher and lower pleasures. They provide nothing helpful to disambiguate whether these pleasures are higher due to the involvement of the higher faculties or whether they are higher simply because they are judged to be higher on the scale of a competent judge's preference. Instead, what Mill offers is merely a test for sorting between pleasures – appeal to a competent judge – without any explanation of the criteria by which the judge sorts. Explaining the latter would be substantively helpful in providing some insight into how Mill views the difference between the higher and lower pleasures, and so the reader is left wondering why Mill only provides the unhelpful statements he does. Reiterating my argument from above, the unhelpfulness of Mill's explanation is more striking when we consider the context of how essential a satisfying account of the difference between the higher and lower pleasures is for Mill's hedonist

³ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁴ Sidgwick, Green, Moore, and Bradley all discuss this dilemma, according to Rex Martin, "A Defence of Mill's Qualitative Hedonism", *Philosophy*, vol. 47, nr. 180, 1972.

utilitarianism. The question we are left with is: what would lead Mill to provide such an unsatisfactory and unhelpful explanation of the higher pleasures?

III. COMTE'S REJECTION OF INTROSPECTION ON INTELLECTUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In this section I present a plausible explanation for what motivates Mill to provide such a dodgy description of the higher pleasures: because Comte's positive philosophy harshly rejects the validity of claims regarding conscious states involving the intellect, Mill describes the higher pleasures only through externally observable phenomena so as not to conflict with Positivism.

Comte ousts psychology from his system of positive sciences, arguing that we cannot properly understand our intellectual mental states from the perspective of the subject, but that observation of these states only has validity from an external perspective, ultimately recommending that psychology be replaced by phrenology.⁵ Comte's motivations for this position are twofold. First, he associates the study of the intellect with the metaphysics of philosophers like Descartes, and his positive system seeks to reject all metaphysical speculation.⁶ In particular, Comte wishes to purge the idea of the existence of an immaterial mind from Positivism.⁷ Secondly, Comte presents an argument against introspection on the intellect, claiming that this would require the thinker to divide themselves into both observer and observed, such that the same organ which observes must observe itself, a seeming impossibility.⁸ Comte claims that it would be "absurd" to suppose that a person can see themselves think, and that the intellect can never be observed directly but only by its results, to wit, externally observable results.⁹ One assumption that Comte makes here is that the observing function of the mind (introspection, awareness, attention, or however we might call this today) is identical with thinking (our conceptual capacities, our capacities for generating thoughts), an assumption that appears to be inherited from the sort of metaphysical views of the mind that Comte is seeking to reject. Consider that Comte follows the phrenologists in understanding different mental functions to have different locations in the brain, but he also views the functions of introspection and intellection to be identical. The same problem of self-observation

⁵Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, vol. 2, Batoche Books, 1999, pp. 98–99. [Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central, May 2024.]

⁶*Ibidem*, pp. 95–96.

⁷Wilson discusses the influence of Gall on Comte, leading him to reject metaphysical understandings of the mind. A further question is why Comte views introspection on our intellectual states as implying a metaphysical understanding of the mind as immaterial – which doesn't logically follow from my contemporary point of view – and Wilson provides some insight into the history of philosophy that influences Comte's view on this matter. Fred Wilson, "Mill and Comte on the method of introspection," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 27, April 1991.

⁸Maja Spener, *First-Person Access in Science and Agency*, Oxford, 2024, p. 20.

⁹A. Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, vol. 2, pp. 98–99.

is not generated in the case of the passions, which are physically located apart from the intellect, such that the intellect can observe the passions.¹⁰ In short, because Comte views our powers of introspection to be identical with our powers of intellection, he argues that introspection on the intellect is impossible, such that any claims regarding our intellectual states drawn from introspection on them are invalid, having no place in the system of positive science.

Mill is aware of Comte's rejection of introspection on the intellect, describing Comte's view as follows:

He [Comte] rejects totally, as an invalid process, psychological observation properly so called, or in other words, internal consciousness, at least as regards our intellectual operations. He gives no place in his series to the science of Psychology, and always speaks of it with contempt [...] Our knowledge of the human mind must, he thinks, be acquired by observing other people [...] it is clear to him that we can learn very little about the feelings, and nothing at all about the intellect, by self-observation.¹¹

Recall from earlier that what we want from Mill in *Utilitarianism* is to explain the nature of the higher pleasures, including how they differ in kind, quality, and value from the lower pleasures. We seek an explanation of how the higher faculties of the intellect might play a role in these states and how they are experienced differently *as pleasures* in opposition to lower pleasures. A satisfying explanation of these issues involves appealing to the characteristics of these pleasures as revealed by introspection, and so a satisfying explanation would directly conflict with Positivism. Instead of the satisfying explanation we desire, what *Utilitarianism* provides is Mill merely offering a description of the higher pleasures that would satisfy a positivist: he only describes the higher pleasures by the external observation of what a competently acquainted judge would choose. In line with Mill's statements in the competent judge passage above, Mill offers us knowledge of the higher pleasures that is acquired merely by observing other people. My argument is that it is reasonable to infer that Mill provides this unsatisfying description *because* he wants to avoid offending the sensibilities of readers influenced by Positivism; in his efforts to provide a scientifically respectable ethics, he sought to conform his arguments in *Utilitarianism* to the positive philosophy that was influential at the time.

Before moving on, it is interesting to briefly consider Mill's responses to Comte's arguments against introspection on the intellect.¹² First, Mill argues that psychologists of the time had already demonstrated that we can attend to more than one mental state at a time. That is, if we understand part of Comte's argument to

¹⁰ F. Wilson, "Mill and Comte on the method of introspection," p. 117.

¹¹ John S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1961, p. 63.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 63–64.

include the claim that it is impossible to attend to both (1) a thought, and (2) our conscious awareness of that thought due to the limits of attention, then the fact that our attention can be divided shows that this is not a legitimate problem with introspection. Second, Mill argues that even if we cannot introspect on our intellectual states at the time they occur, we *can* introspect our memory of just-past thoughts the moment after they occur, introspecting our mental states by what Maja Spener calls “retrospection.”¹³ Thirdly, Mill argues that it is simply a fact that we know our own mental states by directly observing them, rather than by their results. This seems to be an appeal to evidence that is introspectively obvious: we are regularly conscious of our own thinking, and our awareness of our thoughts is a constant wellspring of evidence against the claim that such introspection is impossible.

I argue that Mill refrains from giving a satisfactory explanation of the nature of the higher pleasures because he wishes his ethics to conform to the positivistic science of the day. One might object to this interpretation of Mill by pointing to the above passages where Mill explicitly argues against this aspect of Comte's Positivism. If Mill views Comte's rejection of introspection on the intellect as a “grave aberration” in Comte's positive philosophy,¹⁴ why then would Mill conform to such an aberration in *Utilitarianism*? Note that I am not arguing we can be certain about Mill's motivations in *Utilitarianism*; I don't claim to be providing an absolutely conclusive argument about why Mill avoids providing a satisfying explanation of the higher pleasures. Instead, my argument is an inference to the best explanation. Given that there is this glaring lack in Mill's text – the absence of an explanation of an essential part of his ethical system – how can we explain this lack? It is uncharitable to read Mill as being simply ignorant, not recognizing that his explanation of the higher pleasures could be more informative. In fact, Mill's very own arguments against Comte's rejection of introspection on the intellect is evidence that Mill is aware that explaining our conscious states merely through outwardly observable phenomena is leaving out something crucially important. So, it seems that Mill's dodgy treatment of the higher pleasures is no mere accident, and it is reasonable to infer that Mill knows that in conforming his explanation to the tenets of Positivism, that he has not provided a full explanation of the nature of the higher pleasures. With Mill's arguments against these aspects of Comte's Positivism only published in *Auguste Comte and Positivism* in 1865, four years after the publication of *Utilitarianism* in 1861, Mill may have hoped to conform to the intellectual trends of the time, appealing to an audience influenced by Positivism, especially when his own refutation of this aspect of Positivism was not yet published. Although, this is not to say that the influence of Comte's Positivism is the only factor influencing Mill's disappointing discussion of the higher pleasures. In the next section, I show how Mill's appeal to the competent judge

¹³ M. Spener, *First-Person Access in Science and Agency*.

¹⁴ J.S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 62.

borrowed its content – and perhaps, Mill might have hoped, its credibility – from an even more influential figure in philosophy.

IV. PLATO'S COMPETENT JUDGE ARGUMENT IN *REPUBLIC* BOOK IX

In “explaining” the difference between the higher and lower pleasures, Mill appeals to the preference of a competent judge: one pleasure is higher than another if someone well acquainted with both prefers the one over the other. This argument closely parallels the argument that Socrates gives in Plato's *Republic* book IX.¹⁵ In this part of the dialogue, Socrates and Glaucon are discussing the three parts of the soul (appetitive, spirited, rational) and the three types of pleasures that attend each. The question is: which pleasure is more pleasant? The profit-lover will say the pleasures of wealth, the honor-lover the pleasure of victory, and the philosopher will say the pleasure of learning and knowing truths. Who should we trust? Socrates argues that the philosopher will have experienced every type of pleasure, whereas the profit- or honor-lover may never have truly experienced the pleasures of philosophy. For this reason, because only the philosopher has necessarily experienced the full range of pleasures, the philosopher is the best judge of the three.

Notice the parallels with Mill's argument: both Mill and Plato argue that to know which pleasures are superior we should consult the judgement of a person who is competently acquainted with all the pleasures at issue.¹⁶ However, Plato is more explicit in arguing that the competent judge chooses the pleasures of the intellect, whereas Mill resorts to an even less informative version of Plato's argument. Again, I suspect that Mill may be hesitant to explicitly commit to describing the intellectual nature of the higher pleasures, rather than describing them only in terms of the behavior of the judge, because the former could conflict with Positivism, while the latter is perfectly amenable to it. Building on my argument from earlier, we can best understand Mill's dodgy discussion of the higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism* as being influenced by two factors: Positivism and Plato. Hesitant to appeal to the unscientific-according-to-Comte intellectual nature of the higher pleasures, Mill offers a modified version of Plato's competent judge argument that accords with Positivism. In lieu of providing an informative argument for the superiority of the higher pleasures, Mill provides an argument which, despite its many shortcomings, at least has the strength of a Platonic pedigree.

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 580d-583a.

¹⁶ These parallels are also noticed by: R.C. Cross, A.D. Woozley, *Plato's Republic*, London, MacMillan Press, 1964, p. 265; Paul Shorey, *Platonism: Ancient and Modern*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1983, p. 231; Benjamin Gibbs, “Higher and Lower Pleasures,” *Philosophy*, vol. 61, nr. 235, 1986, pp. 33–34; Roderick T. Long, “Mill's Higher Pleasures and the Choice of Character,” *Utilitas*, vol. 4, nr. 2, 1992, p. 289; Antis Liozides, *John Stuart Mill's Platonic Heritage*, Lexington Books, 2013, ch. 9.

V. MILL'S VIEW OF THE INTELLECTUAL NATURE OF THE HIGHER PLEASURES

While *Utilitarianism* provides little insight into J.S. Mill's¹⁷ understanding of the higher pleasures, a later text provides more detail. I am referring to some of J.S. Mill's commentary on the second edition of his father James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* published in 1869. This commentary takes the form of a series of footnotes – some extending for pages at a time – where J.S. Mill shares his own thoughts in response to his father's ideas. The passages I will examine are found in footnotes in response to James Mill's associationist view of pleasure.

According to James Mill, sensations are themselves neutral regarding their pleasantness or unpleasantness. Sensations only become pleasurable by being associated in our minds with certain ideas or concepts.¹⁸ For example, sounds are experienced as being pleasantly sublime when associated with ideas of great power or might (e.g. a waterfall, a hurricane, an explosion of gunpowder). Consider experiencing the sound of thunder as thunder (i.e., perceiving the sound *as thunder*, experiencing it to be conceptually identified as thunder), which we experience as sublime. But an identical sound produced by the rolling of a cart along a cobblestone road, if *perceived as* being the sound of a cart, will not be experienced as pleasantly sublime. In the case of thunder, it is necessary to recognize it under the concept of thunder to experience it as pleasantly sublime, as well as with the associated concepts of *power*, *danger*, etc. The cart on the road calls to mind no associated pleasurable ideas, when we recognize it under the concept of *cart* it is merely *mundane*, *benign*. With this basic sketch of James Mill's associationist theory of pleasure in place, let us now turn to J.S. Mill's commentary.

In analyzing the following passages, I highlight additional details that Mill shares regarding his view of the higher pleasures, which provide a deeper understanding of the differences in kind, quality, and value between the lower and higher pleasures. Moreover, I demonstrate how this expanded view defends Mill from charges that he is caught in a *hedonic dilemma*. First, a passage in which Mill endorses and expands on his father's associationist view of pleasure:

...those persons, things, and positions become in themselves *pleasant to us by association*; and, through the multitude and variety of the *pleasurable ideas associated* with them, become *pleasures of a greater constancy and even intensity*, and altogether *more valuable* to us, than any of the primitive

¹⁷ In this paragraph and the next, I identify John Stuart Mill as "J.S. Mill," and his father as "James Mill." This is the only paragraph in which I employ James Mill's name, and in the rest of the paper, every instance of "Mill" refers to John Stuart Mill.

¹⁸ James Mill, *Analysis of the phenomena of the human mind*, edited by John S. Mill, A.M. Kelley, 1967, ch. 21, section 3. Examples given are taken from the text.

pleasures of our constitution. This portion of the laws of human nature is the more important to psychology, as they show how it is possible that the moral sentiments, the feelings of duty, and of moral approbation and disapprobation, may be no original elements of our nature.¹⁹

While the first sentence is of primary interest for our purposes, I include the second to provide the context that Mill is describing the higher pleasures; note that “the moral sentiments” is the exact phrase that Mill uses in one of the key passages in *Utilitarianism* discussing the higher pleasures, analyzed earlier. In the passage above, we find that Mill expresses agreement with his father’s view that higher pleasures arise (at least in part) due to association with ideas. This speaks to the difference in kind between the higher and lower pleasures: the higher are distinguished by being associated with pleasurable ideas, while the lower are not associated with pleasurable ideas. This may also be relevant to understanding the qualitative difference between the higher and lower pleasures. In the case of the higher pleasures, the pleasing *x* is *experienced as* being the pleasing thing that it is (i.e. recognized under the pleasing concept, e.g., experiencing the thunder sound as thunder), whereas the neutral or displeasing *y* is experienced as being the neutral or displeasing thing that it is (i.e. recognized under the neutral or displeasing concept, e.g. experiencing the cart sound as a cart on the road). Mill also speaks to the quantitative difference between the higher and lower pleasures: the higher pleasures are of a greater constancy and intensity than the lower pleasures.

A second passage reveals similar notions of Mill’s view of higher pleasures, but it is worthwhile to examine how it reinforces those ideas in a different way:

Supposing that all Beauty had been successfully analysed into a lively suggestion of one or more of the ideas ... the question would still remain [...] why the suggestion of those ideas is so impressive and so delightful. [...] these ideas, including infinity, unity, purity ...] all represent to us some valuable or delightful attribute, in a completeness and perfection of which our experience presents us with no example, and which therefore stimulates the active power of the imagination to rise above known reality, into a more attractive or a more majestic world. This does not happen with what we call our *lower pleasures*. *To them there is a fixed limit at which they stop*: or if [...] they do acquire, *by association, a power of stirring up ideas* greater than themselves, and stimulate the imagination to enlarge its conceptions to the dimensions of those ideas, we then feel that the *lower pleasure has [...] risen into the region of the aesthetic, and has superadded to itself an element of pleasure of a character and quality not belonging to its own nature.*²⁰ [emphasis added]

¹⁹ John S. Mill in *Ibidem*, p. 233.

²⁰ John S. Mill in *Ibidem*, pp. 254–255.

There is much to unpack and examine in this passage, including issues related to how lower pleasures can be transformed into higher pleasures and the empirical basis of lower pleasures as opposed to the ideal basis of the higher pleasures, but for the purposes of this paper, I focus only on the portions I have italicized. Note that Mill states that association with pleasant ideas *superadds* pleasure to those lower pleasures that, absent such associations, would be less pleasurable. Here, the difference in pleasure is *additive*, which speaks to the *quantitative* difference between the higher and lower pleasures. But this addition of pleasure is not merely quantitative, because the pleasure added has a different *character* and *quality* than the lower pleasures. This speaks to the qualitative difference between the pleasures, and I propose this qualitative difference can be understood in terms of those pleasures being experienced-in-association-with these ideas. When the individual experiences the sublime pleasure of hearing (and recognizing) the mighty thunder, this experiencing it *as* mighty thunder, and its attendant pleasure, is qualitatively different than a lower pleasure that is not experienced-in-association-with some “delightful” – as Mill writes above – idea.

This more substantive understanding of Mill's view of the higher pleasures informs some of the interpretative gaps left by Mill's statements in *Utilitarianism*. First, consider how this enlarged view explains the differences in *kind*, *quality*, and *value* missing from the discussion in *Utilitarianism*. Pleasures are different in *kind* because the higher pleasures owe their pleasurableness to contributions from the intellect, whereas lower pleasures do not owe their pleasurableness to the intellect. They are *qualitatively* different because the higher pleasures are experienced as involving the intellect and the unique pleasure it brings, in other words, our consciousness of those pleasures includes, as part of the qualitative nature of that conscious state, the associated ideas and the pleasure that attends them. And they differ in *value* because of the quantitative difference in pleasure between them: the lower pleasures are less pleasurable, while the higher pleasures are more pleasurable. Second, consider how this view absolves Mill from the charge that he is caught in a *hedonic dilemma*. Following my argument, the qualitative difference between the higher and lower pleasures does not reduce to a merely quantitative difference, because we can understand how these pleasures are substantively distinct in quality, due to contributions from the intellect, i.e., association with ideas or concepts. At the same time, this view remains thoroughly hedonistic, because although this view respects a qualitative difference between the pleasures, it likewise understands the higher value of the higher pleasures in terms of pleasure alone, i.e., that they are quantitatively more pleasurable.

VI. CONCLUSION

As Comte's Positivism influenced the philosophical and scientific trends of the time, Mill published *Utilitarianism* in 1861, but conspicuously left unexplained is the nature of the higher pleasures, despite their playing a central role in his ethical system. Four years later, in 1865, Mill publishes *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, where Mill's harshest criticism of Comte focuses on Comte's rejection of the study of intellectual consciousness. Another four years after that, tucked into some commentary on the second edition of his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, Mill reveals that he understands the higher pleasures to be intellectual in nature – presumably influenced in part by Mill's introspection on his own experiences of the higher pleasures – a view incompatible with Comte's positive philosophy. So, over time, we see Mill's published statements regarding the higher pleasures transition from positivist to anti-positivist. I argue that this transition can plausibly be explained by the influence of Comte's Positivism on Mill, a yoke which Mill breaks free from over the course of that decade.

Additionally, I also argue that the influence of Plato is necessary to fully understand Mill's arguments about the higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism*. Inspired by Socrates' competent judge argument in the *Republic*, Mill's unhelpful recapitulation of it can best be understood as lying at the intersection between the influences of Positivism and Plato on Mill's thought.

Analyzing some of Mill's lesser-known commentary on his father's publication, I demonstrate how a more substantive understanding of Mill's view of the higher pleasures helps resolve some of the interpretative issues present in *Utilitarianism*. This reveals that Mill's view is that the higher pleasures are higher because they involve the higher faculties, further reinforcing why Mill would want to avoid highlighting this in his earlier work. While the cursory analysis I offer potentially opens as many new questions as it answers old ones, a more thorough investigation of these matters exceeds the scope of the present paper.

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