

DISCUSSION

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MONRO ON MILL'S 'THIRD HOWLER'

In the fourth chapter of his *Utilitarianism*, Mill defends ethical hedonism. Until recently his argument here has been generally thought to be a tissue of plain fallacies and/or blunders. He confused, it was alleged, 'desired' with 'desirable' and incredibly thought that 'all desire the happiness of all' follows from 'each desires his own happiness'. Recent scholarship has cleared Mill of fault here. He made no such blunders. But that his argument in Chapter IV is not vitiated by obvious howlers in its third paragraph does not, as Mill himself was perfectly aware, establish that his defense of ethical hedonism was justified. Indeed that was just what he went on to try to justify in the body of that chapter. But his defense of hedonism, as Moore and others have argued, is also thought to be broken-backed. Indeed it is generally thought that he has committed a third howler in failing to distinguish a means to happiness from a part of happiness. D. H. Monro, in a significant article 'Mill's Third Howler', has tried to clear Mill's name here as well but, I shall argue, with less success.¹

I

Mill tries to establish that when we desire something other than happiness as an end (e.g. virtue or money) which was originally desired not as an end but as a means to happiness, the object of our desire has, through continued association as an important means to an end, actually become a component of happiness and thus desired as an end. But, Mill argues, if money or virtue, something originally desirable as a means, do not, through association with happiness, come to be taken as a component of happiness, they will not be regarded as ends, but merely as extrinsic goods. On a superficial view of the matter, Mill argues, it appears that we desire other things than pleasure or happiness as ends, but this is only because we do not realize that many things, originally only a fecund means to happiness, have become so closely associated with happiness that they

¹ D. H. Monro: 'Mill's Third Howler', in Robert Brown and C. D. Rollins (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophy in Australia* (1969) pp. 190-203.

now are a component of happiness or are taken as a component of happiness. So that appearances notwithstanding, what in reality is the case is that we seek only happiness as an end and thus—if his tests for desirability are correct—happiness alone is desirable as an end.

If Mill is correct here, and if his earlier arguments about desirability are correct, he has given us good grounds for accepting hedonistic utilitarianism. He has, in the sense in which he set out to do so, proved the principle of utility and established utilitarianism as a sound foundation for morality and social policy.

But has Mill made out a good case for his hedonism? First, as Moore points out, underlying his argument for *ethical hedonism* Mill has a doctrine of *psychological hedonism*, i.e. the contention that in fact we only seek happiness or pleasure as an end. But this doctrine, like psychological egoism, is a very questionable doctrine. As Bishop Butler has shown, we do in fact desire many things other than happiness, e.g. food, sex, security, sleep, money, friendship, an identity, love, etc., etc. Perhaps it is true that we seek them for the *sake* of happiness, but it is doubtful that we *always* seek whatever we seek for the sake of happiness. Consider a sense of identity. It is frequently a source of pleasure, something without which one's life would be impoverished, but it can also be a source of suffering and the suffering might on balance be greater than the happiness. Yet even where this is the case, we or at least many of us would not wish to return to a state of infantile helplessness where we had no sense of who we are in order to gain a greater balance of pleasure over pain or in order to gain less pain on the whole. It does not appear to be true that we only regard happiness as an end.

There is a natural enough way in which we might attempt to defend Mill here. We might make it true *by definition* that to do something for pleasure is to do it for its own sake, as an end and not as a means. Such a consideration might lead someone to believe that it becomes true by definition that the only thing we desire as an end is pleasure. As D. H. Monro points out, this has a certain plausibility but, as he points out as well, it also makes hedonism a vacuous doctrine. Monro's contentions here are worth quoting in full:

Pleasure is, after all, pleasure in something: it is not a mere thrill or twinge. To go walking for pleasure is not to go walking in order to feel a particular physical sensation called 'pleasure'. It is, rather to go walking not in order to get to a particular place, not in order to be healthy, but simply because one likes walking. To do something for pleasure is, in short, to do it for its own sake, as an end and not as a means.

One's pleasure, or happiness, then, can be regarded as just the sum of those things one does for their own sake: the sum of one's ends. It is in this sense that listening to music, or being healthy, can be part of one's happiness. To do something as a means to happiness, on the other hand, is to do it not for its own sake but because it leads to

something that is part of one's happiness: buying a record, for example, as distinct from listening to it.

But if anything one wants for its own sake is part of one's happiness, what becomes of the assertion that 'There is really nothing desired except happiness?' Is it not quite empty? Apparently one can desire anything, and anything that one does desire is thereby part of one's happiness.²

If this is so, then hedonism becomes a truism because it is true by definition, but then while being something we must accept, *given an acceptance of those definitions*, it is not what we have been led to expect when we first came across hedonistic doctrines. What makes hedonism attractive as a doctrine of intrinsic good and as a concept of central significance in morality is the belief that with hedonism we can identify pleasure as something which is distinctive (a certain kind of sensation, feeling or an identifiable dimension of experience) and definitely specifiable as a universal goal, as something all rational men should and/or do seek for its own sake. But on the above reading of Mill no such strong claim is made; rather it is being claimed that everything one wants for its own sake is pleasant or is part of one's happiness. No matter what we want for its own sake, it is to be called pleasant. 'Pleasure is what he wants for its own sake' on such definitions is no longer psychologically informative, for it now has the same meaning as 'What he wants for its own sake he wants for its own sake'. But surely this will not do. We need something less vacuous, and we need to be tolerably confident that here language has not gone on a holiday. In talking in this way, has Monro indicated genuine conceptual links in our language? Has he brought out correctly the logical relations between 'pleasure', 'for pleasure', 'doing something for its own sake', 'ends', 'likes', 'wants for its own sake' and the like?

Mill cannot be defended in this matter by showing his claims are truisms, true because of 'the logic of our language', unless it can also be shown that the definitions (implicit or otherwise) in virtue of which the putative conceptual connections hold, are *descriptive* definitions rather than *stipulative* or *programmatically* definitions. But it does not appear to be the case that the claims Monro makes do rest on descriptive definitions. Rather it seems at least to be the case that he is *giving* 'pleasure' and 'pleasure in something' and the like, special employments instead of trying to discover the hidden conceptual connections they actually have and making claims that rest on descriptive definitions. But no reason is given, and it is not evident that there could be good reasons, for accepting those implicit and unacknowledged stipulations.

Why do I think they are stipulations? Consider the following four sentences. If Monro's claims about what Mill could plausibly be arguing are justified, then all these four sentences should be true and indeed true by

² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

definition (descriptive definition). But it seems that it is questionable that they are true at all, much less true by definition.

1. To get what one likes is to get pleasure.
2. If one likes something just for itself alone that something must be pleasant.
3. Whatever one desires for its own sake is pleasant or at least thought to be pleasant.
4. If I do it for its own sake it must be pleasant.

I ask, *how* does one know any of these claims to be true? Or *do* we even know them to be true? If they are empirical claims we must have evidence for them. But no evidence has been given. Moreover, Monro writes as if no evidence were necessary to know that such claims are true. Yet they are claims of very great generality which do not on the face of it look like analytical truths or even some broader kind of conceptual truth. Yet, if they are not conceptual truths but rather empirical claims what is the evidence for them? If they are genuine empirical claims they would need considerable evidential support. Yet none is forthcoming and it would seem very likely that some perverse Dostoevskian creatures might like unpleasant things or desire things which are not pleasant.

It is natural enough to reply here, 'But for their own sake?' But then one wonders what is being built into 'for their own sake'. The short of the matter is that, their surface grammar (their appearance) to the contrary notwithstanding, they cannot be plausibly looked on as unproblematic empirical claims such as 'To get rather drunk is to get in a state where one may be aroused only to perform poorly', or 'If one hikes alone in the mountains one does something which is dangerous'. With these two cases, as distinct from the above pleasure cases, we have plain empirical claims and we know very well what counts as evidence for or against them. Yet it also remains the case with respect to the pleasure cases, that if we say that they are conceptual truths of some sort then we run into the difficulty that it seems to be quite possible to contradict them and make statements logically incompatible with them without contradicting oneself, saying something logically odd or even deviant. The following, though they are statements which conflict with the above four statements, do seem to be perfectly intelligible and indeed in some contexts they could, it would seem, be true.

- 1.* I do it for its own sake but it gives me no pleasure.
- 2.* There are things wanted in themselves which are hardly a source of happiness.
- 3.* Pleasure isn't the only thing I desire as an end. I also want to be a decent man, even if it is not at all evident that being decent pays.
- 4.* To get what one wants need not be to get what will give one pleasure.

These statements, as far as I can ascertain, are not at all incoherent. The burden of proof is surely on such a hedonist to show that there actually is something incoherent about them, that is to say, the burden of proof is surely on the person who would defend the conceptual truth of 1, 2, 3, and 4. Yet if Monro's statements are so, 1*, 2*, 3*, and 4* would all be conceptually out of order. But no good grounds have been given and none are evident for believing they are conceptually out of order. 3*, in particular, is something that many people do assert. What they say may even be so. But at least we have no reason to think that when they make such utterances what they say is nonsensical or contradictory. Much the same thing could be said for the rest, though 1* in particular would take a little explanation. That is to say, a contextual background would have to be supplied before one could be confident that a quite unproblematical claim was being made. This is as close as Monro's claims for Mill come to being supported by anything in 'the conceptual facts', i.e. in the facts about the logical powers of our expressions.

In sum, and to include as well an earlier point, such a definitional defense of Mill will not do, for even if what it claims is true, i.e. even if the definitions record linguistic regularities, it still makes hedonism vacuous. But, in addition, as we also have seen, it is very unlikely that it is a correct depiction of the relevant conceptual facts.

Finally and most simply, ignoring the complexities of the above argument, even if it is true, as is alleged in Monro's defense of Mill, that to do something for pleasure is to do it for its own sake, as an end and not as a means, it does not at all follow that the reverse is true. That is to say, it does not follow that to do something for its own sake, as an end and not as a means, is to do it for pleasure, for the sake of pleasure or because we enjoy it. It very often is the case that when we do something for its own sake we do it for one of these reasons, but this does not establish that this is *always* so or *necessarily* so. And it is the latter that Mill, if he is to argue in this definitional way, must establish; and, abandoning that, he must at least establish that we in fact *always* so act, if he is to establish, what he is trying to establish, namely that pleasure and happiness, and pleasure and happiness *alone*, are intrinsically good.

II

There is a distinct way in which we might try to defend Mill's claim that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good. This involves dropping psychological hedonism and abandoning definitional arguments but arguing instead—in effect straddling psychological hedonism and ethical hedonism—that all *rational* action is aimed at pleasure or that happiness is the only

thing it is *reasonable* to seek as an end. We do not say everyone in fact seeks pleasure or happiness as an end or takes it to be the sole intrinsic good, but we say instead that if people are reasonable, if they think carefully about intrinsic goodness and about themselves, they will come to see the pleasure and happiness, and pleasure and happiness alone, are the only things it is reasonable to want in themselves. Everything else should be wanted as a means to pleasure or happiness.

Yet the edging question remains: these are fine bald assertions, but how do we know, or do we know, that what they claim so confidently to be so is so? And how would we find out? Again the question of evidence arises. For claims of such great generality very considerable evidence would be needed. But what evidence do we have here? That it is rational or reasonable to want to be happy! This is surely a truism, but it does not take us to the stronger and distinct claim that happiness is the *only* thing a man who wasn't a fool would want in itself or for its own sake. People of intelligence and integrity seem at least to want other things as well. And indeed they sometimes want them for their own sake.

What evidence do we have that they must be or even are confused or are irrational in having such wants or in believing that they have such wants? To claim that they must be either irrational or confused or both has the appearance at least of being baseless, and since this is so, the burden of proof is surely on the hedonist here. Again, there seem to be implicit stipulations being made on the use of 'rational' or 'reasonable'. Ordinarily 'All rational action is aimed at pleasure' or 'Happiness is the only thing it is reasonable to seek as an end', would *not* be thought to be true by definition or to be some sort of conceptual truth. It is plainly not self-contradictory to deny them and to deny them is not to utter something logically odd or even deviant. If the hedonist here so uses them that they become analytic and true by definition, then we should point out that this is something which results from his eccentric usage and holds in virtue of his stipulations, implicit or explicit. But his stipulations are, as far as one can tell, quite arbitrary, and there is no reason to follow them. Finally, it should be borne in mind that 'rational' and 'reasonable' are themselves normative terms, and in ascertaining what we are to do, we must know the criteria for rationality being used before we can know whether we should do what is being advocated. When we are told 'The rational thing to do here is *X*' or 'What is reasonable to do in this circumstance is *Y*', advocacy is going on; we are not just describing how things are. And the same is true for the remarks 'All rational action is aimed at pleasure' or 'Happiness is the only thing it is reasonable to seek as an end'. Before we can know whether we should follow this advice we need to know the criterion of rationality involved, but this takes us to an even more fundamental standard of normative appraisal than that which is found in hedonism. That is to say, if we use the defense of hedonism presently under discussion, we do not use hedonism to find out what our ultimate ends are, but some other unacknowledged and unexplicated

standard hidden in the notion of rationality or reasonableness. So this defense of hedonism is doubly wrong. It is wrong, firstly, because self-refuting, because for it to be right there must be a normative criterion more fundamental than hedonism—supposedly our most fundamental criterion—in virtue of which we judge hedonism to be true, which in turn we inconsistently profess to be our most fundamental normative criterion. Secondly, it is mistaken because it has not been established that pleasure-seeking or the attainment of happiness is the *only* reasonable end, and it has left us with an utterly undefended, uncharacterized, unexplicated, and apparently arbitrary criterion of rationality.

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