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ARTICLES

Classic Hedonism Reconsidered

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Abstract

Few views have seen a more precipitous fall from grace than hedonism, which once occupied a central position in the history of ethics. Recently, there have been efforts to revive interest in the view, including well-motivated pleas for contemporary ethicists to at least take the view seriously. In this article, I argue for the seriousness of hedonism on metaethical grounds. Taking J.S. Mill's argument for hedonism as a test case, I show that historically, classic hedonism was grounded metaethically via a commitment to two positions: empiricist epistemology and the view that pleasure occurs in sensation. Together, these two positions provided principled grounds for various iterations of classic hedonism. Moreover, these two positions are still serious options in both contemporary epistemology and the contemporary literature on the nature of pleasure. Insofar as a contemporary ethicist takes those two views seriously, they ought to take classic hedonism seriously as well.

Keywords: hedonism; empiricism; John Stuart Mill; pleasure; metaethics

1. Introduction

Few views have seen a more precipitous fall from grace than hedonism, which once occupied a central position in the history of ethics. Recently, however, there have been efforts to revive interest in the view, ranging from arguments in staunch defense of hedonism to well-motivated pleas for contemporary ethicists to at least take the view seriously.[1] This literature has primarily been concerned with what some call *prudential hedonism*, a view about well-being according to which pleasure is what is ultimately good for any individual.[2] In this paper, I am interested instead in what I call *classic hedonism*:

[1]For example, see Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), Ben Bramble, A New Defense of Hedonism About Well-Being, *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, 3.4 (2016), pp. 85–112, Roger Crisp, Hedonism Reconsidered, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 73.3 (2006), pp. 619–45, and Chris Heathwood, Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism, *Philosophical Studies*, 128.3 (2006), pp. 539–63. For a related discussion that does make the case for taking hedonism seriously in the context of ancient debates, see Katja Maria Vogt, What is Hedonism?, in *Pain and Pleasure in Classical Times*, ed. by W.V. Harris (Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), pp. 93–110.

[2]This is the case with the examples given in the previous footnote.

Classic Hedonism: Pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good.

Although they sometimes come together, classic hedonism is importantly different from other kinds of hedonism. Prudential hedonism is concerned with what makes life good for an individual.[3] *Hedonistic utilitarianism*, according to which the right thing to do is to maximize the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest amount of people, is concerned with the classification of actions as right or wrong. Classic hedonism, by contrast, is concerned with the question of which ends are worth pursuing. More specifically, it is concerned with the question of which ends are ultimately or finally worth pursuing – which ends are worth pursuing for their own sake.[4]

In this article, I will argue on metaethical grounds that contemporary ethicists should take classic hedonism seriously. I will show that historically, classic hedonism was not argued for in isolation as an ethical view, but was rather grounded metaethically via a commitment to two positions: (1) an empiricist epistemology, and (2) the view that pleasure occurs in sensory experience.[5] Together, these two positions provided principled grounds for various iterations of classic hedonism. Moreover, these two positions are still in various ways considered serious options in both contemporary epistemology and the contemporary literature on the nature of pleasure. Insofar as a contemporary ethicist takes those two views seriously, they ought to take classic hedonism seriously as well. That is, to truly discount classic hedonism as a viable position in value theory, one must argue against at least one of those positions, and this is a non-trivial task.

My aim is to defend classic hedonism as a serious view by situating it historically, and I will primarily focus on John Stuart Mill's canonical discussion. As Christine Korsgaard has noted, there is "a common utilitarian argument that pleasure is the only thing that is good in itself because it is the only thing that we can desire for its own sake."[6] The most famous – or perhaps infamous – iteration of this argument

[3]Classic hedonism and prudential hedonism are similar positions, but there are varieties of prudential hedonism that allow for non-hedonist values, such as aesthetic value, where the value does not ultimately derive from pleasure (e.g. Crisp, 'Hedonism Reconsidered', p. 621). By contrast, in classic hedonist theories, pleasure is the ultimate good in every sense, and even aesthetic value will derive from pleasure (or pleasure's value) in some way.

[4]The equivalence of the notions "intrinsically good" and "worth pursuing for its own sake" goes back to Greek philosophy, which contrasts intrinsic goodness in this sense with instrumental goodness. Historically, this end-sense of intrinsic goodness is what was meant by "intrinsic good" in philosophy until the 20th century (with Kant as a glaring exception), when G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* placed metaphysical questions about the nature of intrinsic goodness at the forefront of ethics. Since then, there has been much debate about how to understand the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value. However, the end-sense of intrinsic goodness has not disappeared; as Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen have noted, many philosophers have not taken the end-sense and the metaphysical-sense of intrinsic goodness to be importantly different (Wlodek Rabinowitz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and for Its Own Sake, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100 (2000), pp. 33–51 (p. 33)).

[5]This is true even of Sidgwick, who, despite styling himself an intuitionist, employed empiricist epistemology in conjunction with the view that pleasure is a feeling in his argument for classic hedonism in *The Methods of Ethics* (Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (London: Macmillan, 1907)). See Stephen L. Darwall, Pleasure as Ultimate Good in Sidgwick's Ethics, *The Monist*, 58.3 (1974), pp. 475–89 for an excellent argument in favor of this interpretation.

[6]Christine M. Korsgaard, Two Distinctions in Goodness, *The Philosophical Review*, 92.2 (1983), pp. 169–95 (p. 173).

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comes from Mill's *Utilitarianism*. In the oft-quoted lines, he says that just as the "only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it," the only proof capable of being given that an object is desirable "is that people do actually desire it."[7] It is on the basis of these very lines that Mill's argument has been widely panned. Anthony Quinton offers the characteristic verdict:

> Universal execration has justly fallen on his view that only what is actually desired is desirable. Mill's critics uniformly and correctly observe that *desirable* means *ought to be desired* and not *can be desired*. It could further be objected that although the fact that something *is* desired is good, and indeed, logically conclusive, evidence that it *can* be desired, the two are not, as Mill seems to suggest, one and the same…[8]

Despite the universal execration, in what follows, I will present a charitable reading of Mill's argument taken as a whole. While the nuances of this argument are not lost on Mill scholars, the interpretation I offer here, which attends carefully to the role of empiricist epistemology in Mill's practical philosophy, is underappreciated by ethicists. According to the reading I favor, claims about intrinsic value are axioms of practical philosophy, which for Mill means that they cannot be argued for by way of a standard proof. Instead, they require a particular kind of fallibilist appeal to experience called "thinking from within."[9]

Moreover, I argue that Mill provides principled empiricist grounds for appealing to the experience of desire to show that pleasure is intrinsically good – grounds principled enough that we ought to take the argument seriously. In defending the seriousness of what is purportedly the most facile argument for classic hedonism, I aim to show that any version of classic hedonism that similarly grounds its claims in empiricist epistemology should be taken seriously, insofar as empiricism remains a serious position in epistemology. As it turns out, this includes the views of the vast majority of classic hedonists, from ancient hedonists like the Epicureans to Mill's fellow modern British empiricists like Locke. That is, I aim to build upon the work of Mill scholars such as John Skorupski, Henry West, and Richard Fumerton – who have carefully investigated and emphasized the link between Mill's empiricism and his hedonism – by expanding this analysis beyond Mill's corpus in two directions: first to the past, showing that this link is a pattern of argument in the history of philosophy stretching back to ancient times, and second to contemporary discussions, arguing that any hedonist view linked to empiricism in this way ought to be taken seriously today by ethicists.

[7]John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. by John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 234. Following the standards of contemporary J. S. Mill scholarship, citations to Mill will be by volume and page number of his *Collected Works*, with the specific texts indicated as follows: "*Logic*" for *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, "*Hamilton*" for *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, and "*Utilitarianism*" for *Utilitarianism*. Additionally, passages quoted from *Utilitarianism* are cited by chapter and paragraph number. Thus, for the present citation, "*Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.3" would refer to volume X of the *Collected Works*, p. 234, and to *Utilitarianism* Chapter IV, paragraph 3. In general, I will follow the standards of historians of philosophy for figures that tend to have specific citation methods (e.g. Akademie numbers for Kant, Bekker numbers for Aristotle, and so on).

[8]Anthony Quinton, *Utilitarian Ethics*, 1st edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), p. 64.

[9]I borrow this phrase from John Skorupski.

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2. The basic argument of *Utilitarianism* IV

I begin with the argument for hedonism from *Utilitarianism* IV.[10] As Mill himself notes, the first sequence of this argument shows only that pleasure is *an* intrinsic good, and not that it is the *only* intrinsic good – a more ambitious claim that I address in Section 8 below. In this section, I first offer a simplified reconstruction of the basic argument, before offering important supplementations to show how the argument can be more suitably – and substantively – formulated. Here is the basic argument:

(P1) What is intrinsically good is what is desirable for its own sake.[11]
(P2) Pleasure is desirable for its own sake.[12]
(C) Therefore, pleasure is intrinsically good.[13]

Let us begin with (P1), which is offered as a definition of intrinsic value. It is crucial to notice that Mill is understanding inquiry about the good in a classic, agential way, as oriented around action and motivation.[14] That is, the sense of intrinsic value he is interested in is the value something has as an end of action, where the intended contrast is with what is valuable as a means to some further end.[15] Mill makes use of the notion of desirability in (P1) precisely to mark his interest in this end-sense of intrinsic value – in what is ultimately worth pursuing as an end in our actions. "Desirable" is a good synonym here for "worthy of pursuit."

The controversy concerning Mill's argument typically stems from his explanation for (P2), that pleasure is desirable for its own sake. As I noted in the introduction, in this explanation he infamously suggests that just as the only proof that an object is visible is that people see it, the only proof that anything is desirable is that people actually desire it. And of course, as Mill points out, people do in fact desire pleasure for its own sake. Thus, pleasure is desirable in itself.[16] G. E. Moore excoriated Mill for making what he

[10]*Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.

[11]*Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.2. Specifically, Mill asserts that when we inquire about what ends are intrinsically good – good in themselves – we are inquiring about what ends are desirable in themselves. Though he phrases this in terms of inquiry, the meaning is clear; we are to understand good in itself and desirable in itself as the same thing.

[12]*Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.3.

[13]*Ibid.*

[14]Mill's concern here is similar to one of Katja Vogt's driving questions in *Desiring the Good*: "What is the good, understood as that which motivates agency?" See Katja Maria Vogt, *Desiring the Good: Ancient Proposals and Contemporary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 30.

[15]The end-sense of intrinsic value, which contrasts with what is valuable as a means, has been widely used in philosophy going back to Greek discussions of intrinsic goodness, including Plato's division of goods in *Republic* II (see Plato, *Republic*, in *Complete Works of Plato*, ed. by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), pp. 971–1223 (357a1 ff.)) and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes and trans. by W. D. Ross, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 1729–867 (1094a1 ff.)). By contrast, the sense of intrinsic value that contrasts it with extrinsic value is highly controversial, and the site of great debate in ethics since G. E. Moore. See Shelly Kagan, Rethinking Intrinsic Value, *The Journal of Ethics*, 2.4 (1998), pp. 277–97, John O'Neill, The Varieties of Intrinsic Value, *The Monist*, 75.2 (1992), pp. 119–37, Korsgaard, 'Two Distinctions in Goodness', and Rabinowitz and Rønnow-Rasmussen, 'A Distinction in Value' for thorough discussions of these debates.

[16]*Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.3. The full quote is as follows: "The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is sound is audible, is that people

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took to be an obvious and elementary mistake; something's being visible is about its being *capable* of being seen, while something's being desirable is about whether or not it is *worthy* of being desired.[17] However, I think there is a more charitable – and textually accurate – way to understand Mill's point, which requires us to attend to his epistemological remarks here: not only *should* we investigate the good (i.e. what is worth pursuing) by considering what people want and pursue, but this is the *only* way to investigate the nature of the good. So, we must ask, why does Mill take pursuit as a guide to value?

3. Mill's empiricist epistemology: "proof" of an axiom of reason

Prior to making the case for (P2) in IV.3, Mill makes several crucial remarks about the nature of the inquiry being undertaken. In IV.1, just a couple of paragraphs earlier, he repeats a point he stressed in I.5, namely that "questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptation of the term. To be incapable of proof by reasoning is common to all first principles; to the first premises of our knowledge, as well as those of our conduct."[18] That is, one cannot provide a *logical proof* to support an axiom of our reasoning, since the nature of such proofs is to *use* these axioms or first principles to derive new pieces of knowledge.[19] He most clearly and explicitly lays out this foundationalist position in *A System of Logic*, a text which is rarely read by contemporary ethicists (despite Mill viewing it as his magnum opus). Consider his comments there:

> Truths are known to us in two ways: some are known directly, and of themselves; some through the medium of other truths. The former are the subject of Intuition, or Consciousness; the latter, of Inference. The truths known by intuition are the original premises from which all others are inferred. [With our] assent to the conclusion being grounded on the truth of the premises, we never could arrive at any

hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as *one* of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality."

[17]G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), §40.

[18]*Utilitarianism*, X: 207–8; I.5 and 234; IV.1.

[19]This is a fairly common understanding of the role of first principles or axioms in our reasoning in early and late modern philosophy. Kant, for example, defined reason as the faculty of deriving knowledge from principles (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), A299/B356), where knowledge from principles simply means our capacity to know a particular from a universal – when knowledge of particular things is obtained through universal knowledge we already hold (A300/B357). For example, I know that when the apple growing on the tree in my parents' front yard detaches from a branch it will fall down. I do not need to directly observe the apple falling to know that, because I can derive this knowledge from a universal principle of nature: the law of gravity. Like Mill, Kant understands both theoretical and practical reason in this way. It should be noted also that Locke, who greatly influenced Mill, defined the faculty of reason in the same way, though he wrote little about practical reason (John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 1.2.9).

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> knowledge by reasoning, unless something could be known antecedently to all reasoning.[20]

For Mill, this is true for both theoretical and practical axioms, and since ultimate ends – i.e. intrinsic goods – are axioms of practical reason, proof by reason is *not* a possible avenue to show that something is intrinsically good.[21]

So, outside of this usage of the term proof (i.e. proof by reason), what *could* constitute proof of an axiom? Mill answers that first principles "may be the subject of a direct appeal to [two] faculties…namely, our senses, and our internal consciousness."[22] Here we see Mill's empiricist commitments come to the fore: axioms are grounded in *experience*, which for Mill includes the senses and something he calls "internal consciousness." While the language he uses is slightly different, Mill is here making a similar distinction to one found in Epicurean empiricism between sense-perception and sense-feeling. For the Epicureans, the objects of sense-perception consist of what they call impressions of external states of affairs, like the heat of a fire, the sound of a dog's bark, and so on. By contrast, sense-*feelings* are impressions of *internal* states of affairs; specifically, the feelings of pleasure and pain.[23] Mill makes much the same move here, though he ultimately allows for more variety in terms of what counts as an internal state of affairs.[24] Consider what he identifies in *A System of Logic* as paradigmatic instances of foundational knowledge, i.e. axioms or first principles of reason:

> Examples of truths known to us by immediate consciousness, are our own bodily sensations and mental feelings. I know directly, and of my knowledge, that I was vexed yesterday or that I am hungry to-day.[25]

[20]John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, VII: A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, ed. by John M. Robson, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 6–7.

[21]Although there are philosophers who would agree that ultimate ends are axiomatic in this way (e.g. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, ed. by Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), who takes his list of four ultimate goods to be axiomatic), not all philosophers agree. Kant is a notable example of such a philosopher (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Ak. 5:110, see also Stephen Engstrom, The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52.4 (1992), pp. 747–80).

[22]*Utilitarianism*, X:234, IV.1.

[23]Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. by R.D. Hicks, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), X.34.

[24]Mill is building upon the Epicurean distinction between internal and external sense-impressions here in thinking of experience in terms of *external* consciousness – i.e. the senses/perception – and *internal* consciousness – i.e. feelings and other acts of the mind. One of the main differences here is that Mill will include other mental activities, like belief, as part of our internal consciousness (e.g. one can investigate whether or not a belief one holds is true, but there is no denying that one in fact *believes* the belief when it is held. We know this from our own internal consciousness – our experience – of holding beliefs.). None of this should come as a huge surprise; not only is Mill part of the tradition of British empiricism, but he makes the Epicurean influence in his philosophy explicit, for example in *Utilitarianism*, X: 211–12; II.6 where he defends Epicureanism from the ways it has been mischaracterized by its opponents. For helpful discussions of the influence of Epicureanism on Mill, see Geraint Williams, The Greek Origins of J. S. Mill's Happiness, *Utilitas*, 8.1 (1996), pp. 5–14, Frederick Rosen, Epicureanism and Utilitarianism: A Reply to Professor Lyons, *Utilitas*, 18.2 (2006), pp. 82–187, Geoffrey Scarre, Epicurus as a Forerunner of Utilitarianism, *Utilitas*, 6.2 (1994), pp. 219–31, and Chris Barker, Troubled Hedonism and Social Justice: Mill and the Epicureans on the Ataraxic Life, *Utilitas*, 35.1 (2023), pp. 54–69.

[25]*Logic*, VII: 7.

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Though he does not explicitly say that "internal consciousness" refers to mental feelings in *Utilitarianism*, he does do so elsewhere:

> The facts which cannot be doubted are those to which the word consciousness is by most philosophers confined: the facts of internal consciousness; "the mind's own acts and affections". What we feel, we cannot doubt that we feel.[26]

Just as the Epicureans hold that we can be certain we are seeing what we are seeing (even if it is a mirage or illusion), for Mill the fact that we feel what we feel is "sufficiently proved by consciousness itself" – i.e. by the experience of those feelings.[27,28]

With this context in mind, we can better understand the role that (P1) is playing in Mill's argument. As we have seen, Mill's empiricist contention – long underappreciated by ethicists – is that we can only prove that something is intrinsically good via an appeal to experience. Crucially for Mill, desire is "a state of passive sensibility" – that is, it is part of our experience (in this case our internal consciousness).[29] Through (P1), which holds that what is desirable for its own sake is good in itself, Mill provides principled grounds for appealing to experience via desire to prove that something is intrinsically good. That is, Mill is appealing to our experiences of what we desire for its own sake as "proof" for what is desirable for its own sake, and thereby for what is intrinsically good.

At this juncture, one may rightly object that Mill is still susceptible to Moore's criticism. Just because we know *that* we desire pleasure for its own sake via our experience of desire does not mean that we *should* desire it for its own sake – that is, it does not mean that it is *desirable*. However, such an objection does not consider what, for Mill, constitutes an appeal to experience such that the appeal could ground an axiom of reason. On his view, the question of whether or not pleasure is desirable for its own sake is indeed "a question of fact and experience," but it is "dependent, like all similar questions, upon evidence." The answer, Mill goes on, "can only be determined by practiced self-consciousness and self-observation assisted by observation of others."[30] Whatever is meant here by "practiced self-consciousness and self-observation assisted by observation of others," this is clearly what Mill requires of an appeal to experience for that appeal to ground an axiom of reason.[31]

Fortunately, we *do* have the resources to understand what Mill meant by these processes of self-reflection: namely, his long treatise on empiricist epistemology, *A System of Logic*. There, contra Kant, he rejects the possibility of *a priori* knowledge (and thus the possibility of grounding axioms of reason via reason itself), and instead understands reasoning as a natural process:

> Principles of Evidence and Theories of Method are not to be constructed *a priori*. The laws of our rational faculty, like those of every other natural agency, are only

[26]John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, IX: An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, ed. by John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 128.

[27]DL X.32.

[28]*Hamilton*, IX: 129.

[29]*Utilitarianism*, X:238; IV.11.

[30]*Utilitarianism*, X:237; IV.10.

[31]Mill is following Locke here in emphasizing the role of self-reflection in the process of gaining knowledge from experience, but as we will see, he has a more elaborate idea of what sort of self-reflection is required for this process.

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> learnt by seeing the agent at work…we should never have known by what process truth is to be ascertained, if we had not previously ascertained many truths.[32]

It is Mill's foundational commitment to empiricism that lies behind his assertion that we can *only* figure out what is desirable in itself by considering what is actually desired. In John Skorupski's helpful formulation, as Mill sees it, the way we figure out what we should believe, what is good, how to act, and so on, is "by careful scrutiny of how we actually reason" and by "reflective analysis of which principles in this practice of reasoning turn out to be treated by us as normatively basic: 'seeing the agent at work'."[33] For Mill, this is the only kind of evidence that can be offered for the normative claims that we hold.

4. Thinking from within

Although Mill never gave a name to this method of scrutiny and reflective analysis, I will follow Skorpuski in calling it "thinking from within."[34] This method of reflection is important for Mill because it investigates whether or not we can reduce some normative dispositions (feeling, thinking, believing, etc.) to others. At the same time, it can raise questions about whether our normative dispositions are justified in light of considerations about how they were formed, and if they are found to be unjustified, this subverts their normative authority. For example, let us say I think that Justin Bieber's singing abilities are mediocre at best. If through a process of self-reflection it turns out that I can show this thought to be solely a result of jealousy (I can reduce the thought to a feeling), the thought will be subverted. Even though it might still be true that Bieber's singing is mediocre, what I have discovered is that my reasons for thinking so were not good ones. That is, this exercise in examining alternative explanations does not show that a normative view, belief, or opinion is false but that it is not justified.

It is crucial to understand that thinking from within, far from looking to subvert our normative dispositions, actually aims to vindicate those thoughts, feelings, and judgments that survive the relevant form of scrutiny.[35] It is the method through which we seek to establish the truth of basic normative claims – i.e. the claims we take to be first principles. If the claim is not subvertible by this process of thinking from within, we can consider this resilience a kind of "proof" of the claim, though obviously not proof in the traditional sense. This makes sense of Mill's comments about widening the scope of what we consider proof in *Utilitarianism* I.5, often ignored by his critics:

> There is a larger meaning of the word proof, in which this question [of ultimate ends] is as amenable to it as any other of the disputed questions of philosophy. The subject is within cognizance of the rational faculty; and neither does that faculty deal with it solely in the way of intuition. Considerations may be presented

[32]John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, VIII: A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, ed. by John M. Robson, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 833.

[33]John Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 9.

[34]*Ibid.*

[35]As Skorupski helpfully puts it, thinking from within "seeks to establish what basic normative dispositions are not subvertible in this way, but are *resilient* under reflection and thus preserve normative authority" (Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?*, p. 10).

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> capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine; and this is equivalent to proof.[36]

If upon serious scrutiny and reflection upon our experience (i.e. on sensation and/or internal consciousness), we cannot find an alternate explanation for a first practical principle that would subvert it in such a way that we withhold assent to it, then we offer our (albeit potentially tentative) assent. For Mill, this is *functionally* equivalent to the standard sense of proof, even if it is not the same. It is worth pointing out that this is a common view about the nature of evidence and proof for fallibilists about knowledge – who we can now see include Mill among their ranks.[37] For Mill, any of the things we take ourselves to know could turn out to be false as we continue what he hopes is a life-long process of self-reflection and thinking from within. But in the absence of defeaters, Mill is perfectly happy to assent to normative claims that are resilient in the face of this reflective process.

5. Elaborating the argument from *Utilitarianism* IV

Let us return to Mill's argument for the intrinsic goodness of pleasure, which can now be elaborated so as to include the significant epistemological points we have just discussed. First, we can attribute to Mill the following three premises:

> (P1) The only "proof" that can be given for a first principle or axiom of reason, including practical reason, is via an appeal to experience (either the senses or internal consciousness i.e. feeling).[38]
> (P2) Ultimate ends (i.e. intrinsic goods) are the axioms of practical reason.[39]
> (P3) The only "proof" that can be given for something's intrinsic goodness is via an appeal to experience.

As we have seen, (P1) comes from Mill's empiricism and his rejection of the possibility of grounding first principles of reason *a priori* via reason itself (his rejection of Kant).[40] The claim made in (P2) is simply assumed by Mill. There is a long history in philosophy of taking the central question of ethics to be "What is the ultimate end at which all actions aim?," going back to Greek philosophy. Mill places himself within this tradition, which is why he assumes (P2) and does not motivate it. (P3) simply combines (P1) and

[36] *Utilitarianism*, X: 208; I.5.

[37] Richard Fumerton does an especially good job discussing Mill's fallibilism in the context of his foundationalist epistemology. As he notes, Mill's epistemological project takes seriously the thought that "to find secure foundations for knowledge you search for those truths you believe where your justification is so strong that you can't even conceive of possessing that justification while what you believe is false" (Richard Fumerton, Mill's Epistemology, in *A Companion to Mill*, ed. by Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 192–206 (p. 194), cf. Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?*, p. 8). And of course, like most of the other empiricists of the modern period, Mill did not think that belief in propositions about the external world could survive this test for foundational knowledge. Rather, we have to rely on how things appear as foundational but must remain open to the possibility that we might be dreaming or hallucinating; our reasoning here is fallible.

[38] *Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.1.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] As Henry West puts it, this premise "denies the existence of an intellectual intuition of the normative ends of conduct" (Henry West, The Proof, in *A Companion to Mill*, ed. by Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 328–41 (p. 333)).

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(P2); it replaces "a first principle or axiom" with "something's intrinsic goodness" in (P1).

We can now attribute to Mill the following four premises, beginning with the premise I originally cast as the first step of his argument:

(P4) What is intrinsically good is what is desirable for its own sake.[41]
(P5) Desire is part of our experience (internal consciousness; it is a feeling).[42]
(P6) The only "proof" that can be given for something's desirability is via an appeal to experience.
(P7) The only "proof" that can be given for something's desirability is via an appeal to the experience of desire itself.[43]

To my mind, the move in (P4) to understand the good in an agential, conative way is plausible on its own terms. After all, we presumably think that intrinsically good ends are ends that we ought to pursue for themselves – i.e. ends that are desirable for their own sake. Moreover, (P4) serves Mill as a way to locate goodness in experience via (P5), which establishes desire as part of our experience. In service of treating goodness as a feature of experience, (P6) refines the inquiry at hand from goodness to desirability by combining (P3) and (P4), and (P7) continues this refinement by specifying which aspect of experience – desire, from (P5) – can be appealed to as the "proof" of desirability brought up in (P6).

At this juncture, we can see that the supposedly controversial idea in (P7), that we must investigate desire to determine what is desirable just as we must investigate what is seen to determine what is visible, is not so bizarre. As Henry West puts it, the analogy is that "as judgments of matters of facts such as visibility are based on the evidence of the senses and corrected by further evidence of the senses" accompanied by the relevant processes of psychological introspection, "so judgments of what is desirable are based on what is desired and corrected by further evidence of what is desired" – evidence that is produced by the process of thinking from within.[44] Following this, we must note one more epistemological remark and make one last refinement:

(P8) To prove something by appeal to experience is to employ the method of "thinking from within"; if in reflecting this way upon experience we find no way to subvert some basic normative claim, this constitutes (fallible) "proof" of that claim.[45]
(P9) The only proof that can be given for something's desirability is by subjecting our experience of desiring that thing to the test of "thinking from within."

Here, (P8) simply serves to explain what sort of "appeal to experience" Mill thinks can ground a practical axiom: his method of "thinking from within." The following premise, (P9), simply replaces "appeal to the experience of desire itself" from (P7) with the method of "thinking from within" outlined in (P8). Essentially, (P9) is asserting that

[41] *Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.3. Originally cast as (P1) in Section 1.
[42] *Utilitarianism*, X: 238; IV.11.
[43] *Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.3.
[44] West, 'The Proof', p. 333.
[45] Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?*, pp. 18–19.

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if, in thinking from within about what we desire, "we find that we desire this (whatever it may be) for itself, and acknowledge it as indeed desirable [in itself] – rather than subverting that judgment and trying to change our desires" – this constitutes evidence and "proof" of a fallibilist sort for the intrinsic desirability of that thing.[46]

Now we can finally take the last steps of the argument, and combine the method of thinking from within with what has been said about desire and goodness:

(P10) Anyone who thinks from within about their experiences of desire will acknowledge the intrinsic desirability of pleasure.[47]
(P11) Pleasure is desirable in itself.
(C) Pleasure is intrinsically good.

It is in (P10) that Mill makes his most important, and misunderstood assertion, which we can now properly understand as saying the following. In thinking from within about our experience of desire, we find that we desire pleasure for itself, and in further scrutinizing the nature of this desire we acknowledge that pleasure is indeed desirable in itself; we find nothing that could subvert the claim and change our desire for it.[48] Although thinking from within cannot furnish "proof" in the traditional sense, for Mill it can functionally play the same role, which means we are now in a position to assert (P11) from (P9) and (P10): pleasure is desirable in itself. And finally, we may at last conclude from this and from (P4) – which holds that what is desirable in itself is good in itself – that pleasure is intrinsically good.

[46]Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?*, p. 19.

[47]*Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.3.

[48]One might wonder how Mill would handle the common thought that there are bad pleasures (or, alternatively put, that we sometimes take pleasure in things that are bad for us). For the purposes of this paper, I wish to set the details of this question aside, because Mill's view on the topic is nuanced, underexplored, and merits its own discussion. As a rough overview, on my interpretation Mill's work in ethology (the "science" of the formation of character) in *A System of Logic* suggests that he drew inspiration from Plato and Aristotle, who conceived of some pleasures as false or faulty and others as real or genuine (see *Philebus* 36a-41b and 51b-53b for Plato's discussion of false pleasures (Plato, *Philebus*, in *Complete Works of Plato*, ed. by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. by Dorothea Frede (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), pp. 398–456), and for Aristotle's similar comments see *Nicomachean Ethics* X.3 1173b21-30 and *Eudemian Ethics* III.5 1228b18-26 and VII.2 1236a7-11 (Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes and trans. by J. Solomon, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 1922–85)). Aristotle in particular thought that whether or not a given pleasure is false depends on the species and health (both bodily and psychological) of the organism in question. Thus, in the human case, only the psychologically healthy – the virtuous – regularly experience real pleasure.

By contrast, on my reading Mill thinks *genuine* pleasures are good, and our pleasure is genuine when it is *ours* and not merely an unreflective product of the social and cultural structures of the society we happen to be born into. This is in part what ties his ethics to the liberalism in his political theory; for Mill, a liberal society where people are free to self-direct the development of their own character (including their habits of pleasure) makes it much more likely that any given person will experience genuine pleasure on a regular basis, and can thus pursue the good on a regular basis. This idea is lurking in the background of Mill's oft-criticized distinction between higher and lower pleasures; he seems to think that when people are truly free to have their *own* pleasures they will tend to pursue "higher" pleasures (perhaps as a matter of empirical, observable fact regarding human psychology). It is beyond the scope of this paper to thoroughly investigate Mill's views here and fully substantiate my interpretation; I leave this to future work.

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6. Ancient and early modern empiricist hedonism

With the above richer understanding of Mill's argument for the intrinsic value of pleasure in mind, we can proceed to discussing the more ambitious claim of classic hedonism, that pleasure is the *only* thing that is intrinsically good. Before discussing how Mill arrives at this position, I want to first briefly discuss how his hedonist predecessors made this argument; in particular, the ancient Epicurean school and the early-modern British empiricists. These philosophers were all empiricists, and so took all our concepts and knowledge to ultimately be grounded in experience, including practical knowledge and concepts. Because of this, their practical philosophy centered around identifying the *practical* component of experience, out of which we build our ethical concepts and knowledge. As we will see, Mill's position on pleasure as the ultimate end is in many ways a nuanced evolution from the more or less uniform position of his predecessors.

Let us begin by considering the hedonism of Epicurus. His argument for the intrinsic goodness of pleasure was staunchly empiricist, and like Mill he denied that any traditional kind of argument was necessary – or could even be given – to show why pleasure is to be pursued for its own sake. Instead, an appeal to experience is required – in this case, a *direct* appeal to experience without Mill's process of thinking from within to examine it. As Cicero put it, Epicurus "holds that we perceive [the intrinsic goodness of pleasure and badness of pain], as we perceive that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet; it is unnecessary to prove any of these things with sophisticated reasoning; it is enough just to point them out."[49] On the Epicurean view, pleasure and pain are the practical side of experience – they are the evaluative elements of experience that inform action and can get us to move – and we know them to be good immediately from experiencing them. It is crucial to note that for the Epicureans, pleasure and pain are the *only* candidates found in experience upon which we can base all our other normative concepts: "Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing."[50] If the Epicureans are right that perception through the five senses and feeling through the two modes of pleasure and pain are the building blocks of all experience, then given their empiricism it would make sense that pleasure is the only possible candidate for intrinsic goodness (and pain for intrinsic badness); all other goodness would have to be derivative in some way from it.

The early-modern British empiricists, whose tradition Mill came from, shared this same position – though unlike the Epicureans, they rarely provided motivation for the view.[51] As Richard Fumerton has noted, generally speaking the early-modern empiricists "usually talked relatively little about the nature of our knowledge of our

[49]Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, ed. by Julia Annas and trans. by Raphael Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), *De Fin*. I.30.

[50]DL X.129.

[51]There is a great deal of evidence that the early-modern empiricists were influenced by Epicurean empiricism in both general methodology and ethics. See *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, ed. by Neven Leddy and Avi S. Lifschitz (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009) for a good volume on the influence of Epicurus on the Enlightenment in general. See R. W. F. Kroll, The Question of Locke's Relation to Gassendi, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45.3 (1984), pp. 339–59, p. 343 ff. for a helpful discussion of the influence of Epicureanism on 17th century empiricism in France and England, both in methodology and ethics (including but not limited to Gassendi and Locke). See also Reid Barbour, Remarkable Ingratitude: Bacon, Prometheus, Democritus, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 32.1 (1992),

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own mental states, nor of the need to build all other empirical knowledge on inference from that secure foundation. It's almost as if they took the framework within which they were working to be simply obvious."[52] Despite this lack of explicit motivation, we can see that they were thinking along similar lines to the Epicureans, at least as far as arguing for the intrinsic goodness of pleasure is concerned. Hobbes, for example, noted that each man calls his own pleasure good and his own pain bad.[53] His explanation for this is that we get the conceptions of pleasure and pain immediately via the senses; that is, our conception of them as good and bad respectively comes to us immediately from experience.[54] He does not mention any other candidates for the practical component of experience, so it is likely that much like the Epicureans, he did not take there to be others. Similarly, Locke held that we come to know pleasure and pain "only by experience."[55] We know that they are good and bad respectively by reflecting upon that experience – in doing so, we will know that they are good and bad from "what we feel in ourselves" in experience.[56],[57] Only pleasure and pain are discussed as the practical elements of experience. This goes for Hume as well, who argued that like all other ideas, practical ones come from some impression or sentiment in experience, and that the relevant impressions by which good and bad are known "are nothing but *particular* pains or pleasures" – that is, particular experiences of pain or pleasure (not the abstract idea of pain or pleasure in general).[58]

As we can see, the classic hedonists that came before Mill similarly grounded their arguments in empiricism; they were not so much focused on arguing in a traditional way for the claim that pleasure is the only intrinsically good thing, but rather sought to *explain its apparent axiomaticity* by appealing to something that seems to be a secure source of knowledge: our own experience. As we saw explicitly in Mill's argument, no standard kind of proof can be given for axioms, since by their very nature they *cannot* be deduced from other propositions. In light of this, Mill's intellectual predecessors sought to provide an understanding of how to assess or ground an axiomatic claim, and their explanation in this case came by direct appeal to experience.

pp. 79–90 regarding the influence of Epicureanism on Francis Bacon. As Barbour notes there, despite Bacon's abandonment of atomism, he "never got Epicureanism off his mind" (p. 79).

[52]Fumerton, 'Mill's Epistemology', p. 192.

[53]Thomas Hobbes, *Humane Nature, or, The Fundamental Elements of Policy Being a Discovery of the Faculties, Acts, and Passions of the Soul of Man from Their Original Causes, According to Such Philosophical Principles as are Not Commonly Known or Asserted* (Oxford: Oxford Text Archive, 2005), VII.3.

[54]Hobbes, *Humane nature*, VII.4.

[55]Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.1, see also 2.7.1.

[56]*Ibid*. Although Locke does not elaborate much on what this process of reflection consists in, Mill was likely inspired by the thought and took it upon himself to expand upon it.

[57]I have omitted a discussion of Bentham here because to my knowledge he simply assumed empiricism in his works (a result of being heavily influenced by Bacon and Locke). We know that he understood pains and pleasures to be "interesting perceptions" (Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2007), V.1), and that this combined with his empiricism led him to endorse both psychological and ethical hedonism (I.1). I suspect his explanation for the claim that pleasure is intrinsically good, if pressed, would have been something like Locke's.

[58]David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3.1.2.

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7. A note on the consequences of separating hedonism from empiricism

Before turning to the final part of Mill's argument for pleasure as the sole intrinsic good, I want to briefly comment on what is lost when the nuances of Mill's argument, as I have reconstructed it thus far, do not receive adequate attention from ethicists. Although hedonism has a long history in ethics, the only hedonist who is regularly taught to undergraduates is Mill.[59] Offered as the representative of hedonism in most ethics classrooms, he is typically taught in a way that separates his ethical arguments in *Utilitarianism* from his empiricism. There are a number of good pedagogical reasons for this, including that the classic Moorean misreading of Mill's argument simplifies the argument to a level of abstraction that is appropriate for the introductory level, and enables instructors to introduce the concept of normativity to young philosophers.[60]

However, because this way of teaching Mill is so widespread, the classic hedonism known to philosophers at large in the present day is precisely this falsely simplified hedonism, which ignores classic hedonism's traditional roots in empiricist epistemology. The cost of this pedagogical approach to Mill is philosophical. In not understanding that classic hedonism and empiricism are traditionally a packaged deal, contemporary ethicists often fail to see the most important metaethical merits and nuances of classic hedonism – namely, that it is best understood as the result of endorsing two broad positions: (1) empiricism, considered a serious position in epistemology to this day, and (2) a view of pleasure on which it is the practical element of sense experience, also considered a serious position in the philosophy of pleasure today.[61]

8. Mill's classic hedonism: pleasure as the "only" intrinsic good

As we saw above in Section 6, Mill's hedonist predecessors largely use the same method to arrive at classic hedonism: a direct appeal to experience, in which they combine their empiricist epistemology with the view that pleasure is the positive practical component of experience, and pain its negative analogue. Mill expands on this basic methodology by going beyond a direct appeal and asking us to reflect upon our experience of pleasure in a particular way to rationally evaluate what experience seems to tell us – namely, that pleasure is intrinsically desirable (and thus good). This gives us Mill's (P10) above, according to which anyone who thinks from within about their experiences of desire

[59]Ancient and medieval hedonism is typically taught in specialized classes on ancient philosophy, and early modern empiricist ethics is rarely taught outside of Hume, who like the ancients is far more likely to be taught in a history course or at a high level with a small number of students.

[60]Additionally, a good reason to teach Mill in this way is that he did not make it particularly *easy* to properly understand his arguments in *Utilitarianism*. Pedagogically, it is probably unwise to assign Mill's *Logic* in an introductory level ethics classroom, because students may not yet have the tools to properly understand that material and link it to the arguments in *Utilitarianism*.

[61]For (1), see David Cobb, Empiricism in the Philosophy of Science (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bristol, 2022), <https://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/21458/> [accessed 8 August 2023], Ch. 2 for a helpful overview of the evolution of empiricism from Hume to the Vienna Circle, and Ch. 3 for an overview of the influence of the Vienna Circle on contemporary epistemology, particularly in Bas van Fraassen and Nancy Cartwright's work in philosophy of science. For (2), see Sharon Rawlette, *The Feeling of Value: Moral Realism Grounded in Phenomenal Consciousness* (King George, VA: Dudley & White, 2016), Aaron Smuts, The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure, *Philosophical Studies*, 155.2 (2011), pp. 241–65, Irwin Goldstein, Pleasure and Pain: Unconditional, Intrinsic Values, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50.2 (1989), pp. 255–76, and Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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and pleasure will acknowledge the intrinsic desirability of pleasure.[62] As I will discuss below, Mill's full explanation for (P10) involves him positing an extremely intimate connection between desire itself and pleasure. Among Mill scholars, there is significant debate about how to interpret what he says about this connection in a way that coheres with other remarks he makes both in and out of *Utilitarianism*. For my purposes here, I am not interested in weighing in on these interpretative debates. Rather, I want to consider the two interpretive options endorsed by most scholars, show that each of them offers a philosophically plausible account of the relationship between desire and pleasure, and show how these plausible accounts lead to the thesis of classic hedonism: that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good.

Before looking at any interpretations, let us first consider what Mill says about why thinking from within will not subvert the claim that pleasure is desirable in itself. He does not merely say that there is no evidence this process can unearth which would undermine pleasure's intrinsic desirability, but that the evidence it unearths makes it *impossible* to deny this claim. According to Mill, the process of thinking from within – which can tell us which normative dispositions can be reduced to others – reveals that "to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences), and to think of it as pleasant, are one and the same thing; and that to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility."[63] Upon engaging in this process himself, Mill came to think that "desirable" and "pleasant" are just "two different modes of naming the same psychological fact."[64] He takes this point – that pleasant and desirable are the same thing – to be self-evident: "[s]o obvious does this appear to me, that I expect it will hardly be disputed."[65]

With this in mind, Mill's assertion of (P10) makes sense, for denying that pleasure is desirable is in effect *to deny that pleasure is pleasant*. That is, given his view that thinking from within about our experiences of desire and pleasure reveal that "desirable" and "pleasant" are the same thing, it would be impossible to reject the claim that pleasure is intrinsically desirable, since that would mean rejecting the claim that pleasure is pleasant. Presumably, Mill's thought here is that no one would deny that pleasure is pleasant, just as no one would deny that a circle is circular. Thus, we can see that his argument that pleasure is intrinsically good because it is desirable really boils down to this: *pleasure is intrinsically good because pleasure is pleasant*.

There are at least two ways to interpret Mill's claim that "pleasant" and "desirable" are the same. The first, accepted by many Mill scholars, is to take what Mill says at face value and read this as an identity claim that is discovered empirically.[66] Given this identity relation, if Mill is right about both his understanding of intrinsic goodness as what is desirable for its own sake and in his empiricist contention that the only evidence we have for what is intrinsically desirable is our experience of desiring things for their own sake, then pleasure is the only possible intrinsic good, because pleasant things are the *only* things we desire more of for their own sake. That is, on this reading pleasure and intrinsic goodness amount to the same thing; there is not one property called

[62] *Utilitarianism*, X: 234; IV.3.

[63] *Utilitarianism*, X: 237; IV.10.

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] *Utilitarianism*, X: 238; IV.11.

[66] For example, see D. D. Raphael, J. S. Mill's Proof of the Principle of Utility, *Utilitas*, 6.1 (1994), pp. 55–63 (pp. 57–59) and Peter Zuk, Mill's Metaethical Non-Cognitivism, *Utilitas*, 30.3 (2018), pp. 271–93 (p. 288).

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"intrinsically good" and another called "pleasant." Rather, to borrow a phrase from Mill, these words are "two different modes of naming the same psychological fact."[67] In the contemporary literature on the nature of pleasure, this identity relation is considered a plausible view of the relationship between pleasure and desire; one of the main theories on the table as a live option is the *motivational theory of pleasure*, according to which pleasure reduces to desire – what it is for something to be pleasant just *is* for us to desire more of it for its own sake.[68] Thus, on this interpretation of Mill, we have good reason to take his view seriously, or at least as seriously as we take contemporary motivational theorists – Mill's position is one worth engaging with.

A second way to understand what Mill means by saying "desirable" and "pleasant" are the same focuses on what it means to "think of an object" as desirable or pleasant. On this interpretation, thinking from within about desire and pleasure reveals that when we desire something for its own sake, we desire it precisely *because* we think of it as pleasant.[69] As Skorupski notes, this idea, that "whatever we desire, we desire under the idea of it as pleasant," is regarded by Mill "as a psychological law about all desires."[70] In other words, Mill can be understood as endorsing a kind of psychological hedonism; in order to be motivated to pursue something as an end at all, we must in some way conceive of that thing as pleasant.[71] Thus, on Mill's view, if I want chocolate cake I want it precisely because I think its taste will be pleasant – it will taste good. Similarly, if I want to attend a live performance of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, I want to do this precisely because I think of watching and listening to such a performance as pleasant in some way.

If we understand Mill as a psychological hedonist, then this explains why he asserts both that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good and that things like health or listening to music "are desired and desirable in and for themselves."[72] For Mill, things like health, virtue, or listening to music are desirable for their own sake not as a *means* to pleasure but only *insofar as* they are conceived of, in some way, as pleasant. This is what Mill means when he says that whatever "is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to [pleasure], is desired as itself *a part* of [pleasure], and is not desired for itself until [it] has become so."[73]

[67] *Utilitarianism*, X: 237; IV.10.

[68] For example, see Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Chris Heathwood, The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire, *Philosophical Studies*, 133.1 (2007), pp. 23–44, and Heathwood, 'Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism'. See Smuts, 'The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure' for a good gloss of motivational theories, as a well as several objections to this approach to investigating the nature of pleasure.

[69] There is good reason to think that Mill did not intend an identity claim. For example, consider what he says in his editorial comments on the 1869 edition of his father's comprehensive inquiry into the psychology of character formation, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*. There he reflects upon the experience of desire and pleasure, and says that desire "is involved in the very fact of conceiving it as pleasant; but this, when looked into, only means that [desire and pleasure] are inseparable; not that they are, or that they can ever be thought of, as identical" (John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, XXXI: Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. by John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 251).

[70] Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?*, pp. 19–20.

[71] Skorupski himself actually denies that Mill is a psychological hedonist, but Nicholas Drake very effectively shoots down his objection (see Nicholas Drake, A Humean Constructivist Reading of J.S. Mill's Utilitarian Theory, *Utilitas*, 28.2 (2016), pp. 189–214 (p. 212–14)).

[72] *Utilitarianism*, X: 235; IV.5.

[73] *Utilitarianism*, X: 237; IV.8. Emphasis added.

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Given Mill's psychological hedonism, to say that something like virtue is desired in itself is to say that virtue is conceived of as pleasant in some way. For Mill, when this happens it is not that virtue is itself taken to be the ultimate good, but rather that in conceiving of it as desirable in itself (and thereby pleasant), it becomes part of one's conception of pleasure as a whole (or one's conception of the pleasant life as a whole). So, while we can in some respect refer to things like virtue and health as intrinsically desirable and thus intrinsically good, this desirability and goodness ultimately derives from their being thought of as pleasant. In this respect, pleasure should be understood as the only true intrinsic good, without which nothing else could be understood as desirable for its own sake. In the same way that Mill's classic hedonism – when he is read as an empiricist endorsing a motivational theory of pleasure – ought to be taken seriously by contemporary philosophers, so too should his hedonism be taken seriously when read as an empiricist psychological hedonist. While psychological hedonism has its detractors in contemporary philosophy of action, it also has its fair share of proponents.[74,75] Mill's position is not any less viable than other contemporary psychological hedonists.

9. Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, I showed that John Stuart Mill provides principled fallibilist empiricist grounds for his appeal to the experience of desire in arguing that pleasure is intrinsically good, and that his argument – when considered in its proper epistemological context – is serious and robust. In particular, we can now see that one great strength of Mill's argument is that he does not attempt to "prove" the claim that

[74]For examples of detractors, see John Lemos, Psychological Hedonism, Evolutionary Biology, and the Experience Machine, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 34.4 (2004), pp. 506–26, Geir Overskeid, Psychological Hedonism and the Nature of the Motivation: Bertrand Russell's Anhedonic Desires, *Philosophical Psychology*, 15.1 (2002), pp. 77–93, Richard Kenneth Atkins, Peirce's Critique of Psychological Hedonism, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 23.2 (2015), pp. 349–67, Peter Nilsson, Butler's Stone and Ultimate Psychological Hedonism, *Philosophia*, 41.2 (2013), pp. 545–53, and Valerie Tiberius and Alicia Hall, Normative Theory and Psychological Research: Hedonism, Eudaimonism, and Why it Matters, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5.3 (2010), pp. 212–25.

[75]Psychological hedonism is especially popular among philosophers of biology and in empirical science more broadly. For example, see Justin Garson, Two Types of Psychological Hedonism, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 56 (2016), pp. 7–14, Ulrich Mees and Annette Schmitt, Goals of Action and Emotional Reasons for Action. A Modern Version of the Theory of Ultimate Psychological Hedonism, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38.2 (2008), pp. 157–78, David Brax, Pleasure in the Motivational System: Towards an Empirically Responsibly Theory of Value, in *Proceedings of the Lund-Rutgers Conference*, ed. by Martin Jönsson (Lund: Lund University Philosophy Reports, 2008), W. K. McAllister, Toward a Re-Examination of Psychological Hedonism, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 13.4 (1952), pp. 499–505, and A. Phillips Griffiths, Kant's Psychological Hedonism, *Philosophy*, 66.256 (1991), pp. 207–16.

There is also precedent for psychological hedonism throughout the history of ethics. For example, almost all ancient classic hedonists were psychological hedonists (e.g. the Epicureans and the Cyrenaics), Aristotle is read by many well-regarded scholars as a psychological hedonist (e.g. Jessica Moss, *Aristotle on the Apparent Good: Perception, Phantasia, Thought, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford University Press, 1991), and Eduard Zeller, *Aristotle and the Earlier Peripatetics*, trans. by B. F. C. Costelloe and J. H. Muirhead, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green, and co., 1987)), and even Kant is a psychological hedonist in all cases of action except when one's will and subsequent actions are determined by respect for the moral law.

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pleasure is intrinsically good in a traditional sense, but rather places the claim within an epistemological framework that reveals and explains the axiomaticity of the claim.

Following his empiricist predecessors, he understood that the task of arguing for the intrinsic goodness of pleasure – taken as an axiom – could *not* be a traditional argument, but instead required an explanation, via appeal to a broader epistemological framework, of what constitutes possible epistemological grounds for axioms in general and thereby *this* practical axiom specifically.

With this in mind, we can see that what is considered by many to be a great weakness in Mill's argument is actually a strength that builds upon the work of the other British empiricists. Mill makes central the commitment to discussing the good from the standpoint of agency, i.e. as that which can motivate action, and this attention to agency is ultimately why he departed from his empiricist brethren and gave a *conative* argument appealing to desire rather than a straightforward appeal to the experience of pleasure like Locke or Hobbes. This allowed him to not only explain the tight connection between pleasure, value, and experience, but also the relationship those three concepts have to *desire*. Moreover, Mill's claim that "pleasant" and "desirable" are at least in some sense the same thing is a plausible philosophical view in contemporary philosophy – at least on the two most common interpretations of the claim. As we saw above, it is this claim, combined with his empiricism, that leads him to the classic hedonist conclusion that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good.

If Mill's view of pleasure and his commitment to empiricism are both plausible and serious positions in contemporary philosophy, then this means that classic hedonism must also be understood as serious and plausible – and ought to be treated as such. This is true of the other classic hedonists as well, who were committed to empiricism and held the plausible view that the feeling of pleasure is the practical side of sensory experience, and therefore the ultimate source of all our practical knowledge and concepts. Of course, this is not to say that Mill and the other classic hedonists are above critique. For example, we might not buy Mill's optimism about the ability of "thinking from within" to furnish good evidence for our normative claims, and there are issues with the now outdated associationist psychology he employed in his epistemology. Similarly, we may not be convinced by the kind of naïve realism the Epicureans employ in their empiricist arguments for hedonism. However, this does not mean that we should dismiss the potentially substantive philosophical project of developing a classic hedonist view out of an empiricist framework. Ultimately, in order to reject classic hedonism wholesale, we must either reject empiricism as an epistemological framework or reject views such as those of Mill and Epicurus that locate pleasure in sensory experience – both tall tasks.

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