

James and John Stuart Mill on The Felicific Calculus: Two Close Views?

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Abstract: Though John Stuart Mill took care to distinguish his conception of hedonism from that of his predecessors, he surprisingly claimed that his father shared his understanding of pleasure, so that the question of knowing whether John Stuart was a kind of “heterodox” or “orthodox” Utilitarian is still opened. By recalling and reconstructing their psychological associationist background, this paper suggests that the three departments of what John Stuart called “the art of life” – morality, expediency, and aesthetics – cannot bypass the part the felicific calculus plays in the decision process. I argue that it is in and by the felicific calculus, resting upon the emergence of ideas which found the distinction between the higher and the lower pleasures, that morality and expediency are based on, and that aesthetics or “disinterested” actions may paradoxically presuppose an unconscious calculation formed by deeply rooted habits.

Keywords: James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Felicific Calculus, Classical Utilitarianism, Psychological Associationism, Art of Life.

Introduction

At John Stuart Mill’s time – and to some extent again today –, Utilitarians are often criticized for being unsympathetic and cold calculators, caring only for the consequences of an interest or hedonic calculus, and not for the character or the moral qualities which give birth to human action. After his mental crisis and the deaths of his predecessors –, Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, his father –, he will respond to such critics in his famous essay *Utilitarianism* published in 1861. Better: he will take into account them in order to provide a complete and more satisfying definition of Utilitarianism than that of his predecessors. Because, though John Stuart Mill considered himself as a Utilitarian, he considered himself as

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a kind of “heterodox” in that school of thought: it is well-known that after his mental crisis, he many times explicitly distanced himself with the teaching of standard Utilitarianism.

John Stuart Mill praised Bentham as a jurist, but disqualified him as a philosopher, claiming that he propagates at best the “petite morale” of interest. “It is fortunate for the world”, John Stuart Mill wrote, “that Bentham’s taste lay rather in the direction of jurisprudential than of properly ethical inquiry” (John Stuart Mill 1838, p. 98). Nevertheless, John Stuart Mill painted a much more ambiguous intellectual portrait of his father. On the one hand, despite his Utilitarian, precocious and intensive education supervised by his father, he viewed himself as a “deserter” from his legacy (John Stuart Mill 1873, p. 189). On the other hand, he especially praised him where he disqualified Bentham. He considered, indeed, that his father was far from being “a mere follower or disciple” of Bentham, speculating that “he will be known to posterity as one of the greatest names in that most important branch of speculation [analytic psychology], on which all the moral and political sciences ultimately rest” (John Stuart Mill 1873, p. 213).

While James Mill is today considered as an author in the shadow of his close intellectual environment¹, one can assume the opposite view. For instance, it is possible that, despite “the intellectual revolution” of John Stuart Mill, he still followed to a certain extent the moral convictions of his father. We should not forget, for example, that John Stuart Mill viewed him as a *Socratici viri* (John Stuart Mill 1873, p. 49). Regardless the question of knowing whether such a picture is pertinent, it likely explains why his readings of Socrates constituted for him important memories from his domestic education, and why he was in search of ideal excellence. Individuals and things are important not because they are useful only, but because of their “*intrinsic usefulness*” (John Stuart Mill 1873, p. 49; my italics). Surprisingly, this idea is directly related to the way in which John Stuart Mill understood his father’s hedonism, when he claimed that “*He [James Mill; VB] never varied in rating intellectual enjoyments above all others, even in value as pleasures, independently of their ulterior benefits*” (John Stuart Mill, 1873, p. 50; my italics).

Since the publication of John Stuart Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, a lot have been said about his qualitative hedonism, and it is usually agreed that his distinction in kind between the higher and the lower pleasures, leading to a sort of eudemonistic conception of happiness, is what fundamentally distinguishes him from orthodox Utilitarians (see, for example, J. B. Schneewind 1976; R. W. Hoag 1987, 1992; M. C. Naussbaum 2004; D.E. Miller 2010; Jonathan Riley 2010b). However, this interpretation may raise a concern in light of John Stuart Mill’s aforementioned quote. If one believes John Stuart Mill, indeed, his so-called “qualitative hedonism” would not be so specific to him, but also surprisingly to the propagator and spokesman of Classical Utilitarianism; the man who gave to Bentham a school of thought. The picture of classical utilitarianism would then appear more complex than it seems to be. Two other interpretations may see the light of day. First, John Stuart Mill would be not sincere when he wrote on his father. However, since he did not also hesitate to criticize him in his

¹ As Alexander Bain — the biographer of both Mill — wrote: “[I]t will be said of James Mill that his greatest contribution to human progress was his son, whom he educated to be his fellow-worker and successor.” (Alexander Bain 1882b, p. 1). We could have the same kind of idea when considering the relation between David Ricardo and James Mill, when the latter coached the former on the art of composition (Mill to Ricardo, 9 Nov 1815, pp. 320-321) and political involvement (Terrence. W. Hutchison 1953). As for the relation between Bentham and James Mill, Élie Halévy’s famous quote according to which “Bentham gave Mill a doctrine, and Mill gave Bentham a school” (E. Halévy (1904, p. 249) is explicit enough in the field. Though partial, this overall view corresponds to the one James Mill himself wanted to give when claiming, for instance, that he was more an enlightened schoolmaster than an original thinker (see, for example, James Mill 1826, pp. iii-iv).

Autobiography, there seems to me no reasons why this should be considered as an act of filial piety; as well as when he acknowledged the importance of the principle of utility in Utilitarianism. Second, John Stuart would misunderstand his father's hedonism. In view of his special Utilitarian education and the fact that he was an attentive reader and commentator of James Mill's major works on psychology and philosophy, such as *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829) and *Fragment on Mackintosh* (1835), this could seem a bit excessive, though possible. Anyway an inquiry is needed in order to understand their conceptions of hedonism. Some authors have put into perspective John Stuart Mill's heterodoxy by recalling his radical background (Keith. H. Quincy 1980; Frederick Rosen 2003; Antis Loizides 2014). In the "continuation" of their approach — in the sense that I focus my speech on the intellectual relation between a father and his elder son —, the aim of this paper is to reconstruct their conception of hedonism in order to know whether they are compatible or close. Drawing on their associationist background, my main result is that the three departments of what John Stuart Mill called "the art of life" (John Stuart Mill 1843b, p. 949) — morality, expediency, and aesthetic — cannot bypass the part the felicific calculus plays in the decision process.

The first section shows that morality is expressed in and by calculation. It shows that any moral actions should presuppose an intention, which James & John Stuart Mill defined as the process into which we anticipate the consequences of our future actions for others *and* ourselves. Above all, I claim that it is the emergence of ideas, on which calculation rests upon, that distinguishes the higher from the lower pleasures, and that this allows to reconsider the controversy between qualitative and quantitative hedonism. The second section explains that the calculation plays obviously an important part of the department of expediency: a good calculation rests upon the acquisition of virtues, such as prudence. But this can lead to two different directions. The first is a "simple expedient" action, that is, narrowed self-regarding actions; the second is a "general expedient" one, then including other-regarding aspects, so that they are related to the domain of morality. The third section suggests that the domain of aesthetic — beautiful or noble actions, or disinterested actions — is not incompatible with the fact of calculating by habit, without being aware of the process. As strange as it sounds, the argument is that we can follow things for themselves, whereas it is the result of an unconscious calculation formed by deeply rooted habits. At last, I conclude by suggesting that the so-called orthodox definition of happiness according to which it is "intended pleasure" (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 210) is fully compatible with the art of life, since it includes the notion of calculation through that of intention.

1. Calculation and morality

Here I claim that calculation appears in the foundation of morality (§1.1.) and to some extent in its end, the highest pleasures (§1.2.).

1.1. Morality as an attribute of calculation

It is today usually agreed that Classical Utilitarianism implies a kind of consequentialism. It is interesting to recall that in their vocabulary and systems of thought, it is the contrary: the morality of action depends on its intention (Victor Bianchini 2016). But their understanding of intention is quite strange for a modern reader: they reduced it to a complex process through which we expect the pleasurable consequences of our future action. Without calculation, therefore, we cannot talk about intention and morality. This idea appears clearly in James Mill's *Fragment on Mackintosh* (1835, p. 161), which is the result of a length critic Mill wrote about Sir James Mackintosh's *Dissertation on the progress of Ethical Philosophy chiefly during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1829).² Some years later, by commenting his father's *Analysis*, John Stuart Mill will acknowledge such understanding of intention by claiming that it is "intention, that is, the foresight of consequences, which constitutes the moral rightness or wrongness of the act" (John Stuart Mill 1869a, p. 253).³ He also underlined it in the second chapter of *Utilitarianism* (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 220), though he will quote Bentham on this matter⁴, which can explain why we also found the reference in his *Essay on Bentham*, when he wrote "the morality of an action depends on its foreseeable consequences" (John Stuart Mill 1838, p. 112). Henry Sidgwick will also adopt the same understanding of intention in his *Methods of Ethics* (Henry Sidgwick 1907, p. 202), so that this will open the path to Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe's vehement critics on the field in her essay entitled "Modern moral philosophy" and published in 1958.

More generally, the matter of expectation for the Mills was fundamental to psychology, on which morality rests upon. It is a "psychological truth", proved by experience, John Stuart claimed in his treatise on Hamilton's philosophy, "that the human mind is capable of Expectation", formed by the complex association of previous and actual sensations, which are often learnt by experience (John Stuart Mill 1865a, p. 177). Such psychological truth founds the domain of morality. James & John Stuart Mill could not understand that morality may be expressed without calculated action. "When I ask myself", James Mill wrote, "what morality not acting is — I cannot find an answer. Morality not acting appears to me to be the negation of morality" (James Mill 1835, p. 3). The Mills did not believe in the "passive" morality but rather in the "active" one; the moral individual is an active one and not a passive one. To be moral, we ought to have an impact on the real world of events. This is why they considered

² The critique initially took the form of "severe" letters intended for Mackintosh. But further to unexpected Mackintosh's death, the letters seemed to Mill "incongruous", so that the latter decided to change the form of the writing. This change gave birth to the *Fragment* — see the preface of the *Fragment* (1835, pp. iii-iv); see also Mill's letter to Brougham, written the 27 August 1834, quoted in Bain (1882, pp. 372-374).

³ John Stuart nevertheless remained sceptical about his father's relation between desire and intention.

⁴ Recall that Bentham devoted already several passages to the question of intention in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. The chapter especially and explicitly devoted to that question is the eighth (Bentham 1781, pp. 82-88). Besides distinguishing intention with regard to the action itself from intention with regard to its consequences, he also distinguished consequences which are "directly intended" from those which are "obliquely" intended. Though James & John Stuart Mill quoted Bentham on the question of intention, it seems that they had a "simpler" comprehension of the term. According to them, intention is a kind of calculation of the pleasurable consequences of an action. This seems to me enough for the purpose of this chapter, in that James & John Stuart Mill viewed morality as a matter of calculation. I try to deal with the more general question of intention in Classical Utilitarianism in Bianchini (2016).

that intention finds exclusively its reference in the consequences of our acts. If our intention or calculation should guide our action, it is because it gives rise to either pleasurable consequences, or painful ones. This leads to consider more closely the relation between the two sovereign masters — pleasure and pain — and calculation.

1.2. The quality of pleasure and the moral calculation

Though all Classical Utilitarians acknowledged the important part pleasure plays in the decision process, John Stuart Mill's analysis of the higher and the lower pleasures has given rise to a long controversy regarding the question whether it is the quantitative or qualitative hedonism that is at stake in Classical Utilitarianism. The usual view of John Stuart Mill on this matter is that he distinguished different pleasures in nature, but not in degree, contrary to his predecessors. However, the fact that he saw his father's hedonism close to his own encourages an analogy between both views. Here I argue that for both, the emergence of ideas, on which calculation rests upon, is what distinguished the higher from the lower pleasures. To do so, after having recalled that the Mills were in line with the principle of utility and psychological associationism, I will underline the fundamental distinction between a sensation and an idea, in order to show that the corporeal or animal or primitive pleasures rest upon sensations, whereas the mental pleasures rest upon ideas. This will then allow us to understand that the fact of performing the felicific calculus presupposes the formation of an idea and therefore of mental pleasure at least.

In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham (1781, p. 4) wrote "that which is used to prove everything else, cannot itself be proved". We know that his sort of "Arkhè (ἀρχή)" is the principle of utility, which constitutes the foundation of everything, and therefore of morality. It seems that James and John Stuart Mill follow the same path emphasized by Bentham. James Mill underlined that "pleasure is an end, and *generally speaking*, the only end" (Mill 1835, p. 360). Of course, "(t)he pleasure may be in company or connection with things infinite in variety. But these are the accessories; the essence, is the pleasure" (Mill 1835, pp. 389-390). Though the matter is a much more delicate in John Stuart Mill, he makes clear in *Utilitarianism* that in the domain of morality, "pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends", and that this does not affect his theory of life (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 210).

A clarification on their understanding of pleasure is still needed. The fact that pleasure is the end of action does not prevent them distinguishing different "species of pleasure". Bentham already distinguished the following and well-known characteristics or qualities allowing to establish a numerical value to each pleasure: duration remoteness, purity, richness, intensity, certainty and extent. John Stuart Mill was not fully convinced by such classification which, according to him, does not include the idea that pleasures are different in kind. Yet, "(i)t is quite compatible with the principle of utility, he wrote, to recognise the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others" (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 211). Here appears an important point: as Quincy points out, this quote shows that John Stuart Mill's hedonism did not basically challenge the orthodox conception (Keith. H. Quincy 1980, p. 467-468). Especially when John Stuart Mill himself acknowledged

that there are cases in which “a difference in degree (as is often the case in psychology) becomes a real difference in kind” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 251).⁵ In other words, in terms of pleasure, this would mean that when two pleasures have attained a difference to such a degree, they become different in kind, thus putting into perspective the so-called “intrinsic differences” of pleasures in John Stuart Mill’s hedonism.⁶ It remains to be seen how the difference emerges between pleasures. Here again, John Stuart is more close to his father than it seems to be.

“It is well-known, James Mill wrote, how small is the value of all the merely corporeal pleasures, when taken nakedly by themselves”.⁷ To the contrary, “the purely mental pleasures, those which begin and end in the existence of pleasurable thoughts, hold a high rank among the enjoyments of our nature” (James Mill 1836, p. 558). This makes echo to the well-known Epicurean tradition in Classical Utilitarianism.⁸ A Utilitarian conception of happiness or pleasure is thus not construed narrowly in the sense of Cyreniacs, by focusing on corporeal and instantaneous pleasures, but rather on the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures.⁹ John Stuart Mill was of course well aware of this, since he acknowledged that such a traditional connection in *Utilitarianism* allows easily to take into account the fact that “(H)uman beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 210). After all, we find here the basic idea, though not necessarily true, that which fundamentally distinguishes animals from human beings is that the former focus on physical pleasures, whereas the latter can also have the possibility to be pleased mentally. But we still do not know on which theoretical grounds the distinction between pleasures rests upon. To do so, it is useful to reiterate that James and John Stuart Mill were associationists.

In the way of those who formulated and re-formulated psychological associationism before him – for instance, David Hume, David Hartley, James Mill, Alexander Bain, etc. –, John Stuart Mill believed that there are no a priori truths. Contrary to the intuitionists, he viewed the matter of truth as the result of the association of ideas derived from experience. Let us not forget, indeed, that he followed many of his father’s argument, the man he considered as one of the greatest names in that most important branch of speculation [analytic psychology]” (John Stuart Mill 1873, p. 213). And a lot of evidences show that John Stuart Mill held Alexander Bain in high regard, knowing that such an important figure of Associationism was also the author of the respective biographies on the two Mills. By 30 October 1843, John Stuart Mill declared “I see only Bain as the one, if I were to die tomorrow, in whom I would be sure of leaving a successor” (John Stuart Mill 5th October 1844, p. 638; my traduction; see also Cairns Craig 2015, p. 96). Some years later, Bain and John Stuart Mill will prepare a new edition of James Mill’s *Analysis*. As Cairns Craig say quite rightly: “John Stuart Mill believed that his father’s work had appeared too early to be properly appreciated, and that the reissue of the *Analysis* with new annotations would not only re-establish the reputation of his father’s work,

⁵ See also Ernest Sosa (1969, pp. 154-172) and Keith. H. Quincy (1980, p. 468).

⁶ In the same way, John Stuart Mill did not hesitate to acknowledge that he was agree with his father’s distinction between a quantity and a quality (John Stuart Mill 1869a, pp. 189-190).

⁷ What James Mill called a “corporeal pleasure”, his elder son named it a “pleasure of mere sensation”, or a “bodily” one, or an “animal”, or “primitive”, or “beast” one (John Stuart Mill 1861, pp. 210-211).

⁸ One can refer to Rosen (2003) on the relation between Epicureanism and Classical Utilitarianism.

⁹ For an interesting interpretation providing a more complex picture of the Cyreanic philosophers — and therefore less caricatural —, see Kurt Lampe (2015).

and the continuing relevance of the central conception on which his psychology and Mill's own Logic was founded—the 'association of ideas'—but would help roll back the influence of the 'intuitionists', who, since the arrival in Britain of Kantian thought in the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Sir William Hamilton, had threatened to undermine the 'Experience-philosophy' (Bain 1882: 82) of the British empirical tradition" (Cairns Craig 2015, p. 96).

From a basic associationist viewpoint, two kinds of "feelings" represent the two fundamental steps preceding human action. The first is a sensation, reflecting the interaction between our senses and our environment; the second is an idea, which is a "copy", a "trace", a "representation", or even an "image" of the sensation which remains after the sensation has vanished (James Mill 1829, vol. 1, p. 52). It follows that a mental pleasure comes from an idea, whereas a corporeal one, comes from a sensation. The latter is always rooted in the present; it is experienced physically, through the working of sensations. In other words, it is always instantaneous. But once the object of sensations stops, pleasure is gone. By contrast, an idea exists as soon as the object of sensations is not present anymore: we can think about such an object either forward or backwards in time. Better: not only the object of pleasure can be contemplated in the past or in the future, but it can also, thanks to the laws of associations, be associated with many and different things, which will render the idea of pleasure higher than the pleasurable sensation itself. Take an example. I drink water: this is a pleasurable sensation. If I think about such pleasure, I have a mere idea of pleasure. But this mental pleasure tends to be naturally associated with another ideas we can have. For instance, it can be associated with the idea of style – how I drink the water –, or the idea of solitude – if I drink alone –, or the idea of others – if I usually drink in community or society –, or even the idea of "beautiful" – I can imagine to drink water in an arid, silent, and magnificent desert. In that sense, an idea is much more dynamic and perfectible than a sensation, in that it can be associated with everything which makes sense to us. In other words, an idea has the potential to converge toward an "infinite" configurations of associations – even if human beings cannot experience actual infinity, like in the Aristotelian and Millians senses¹⁰. Let us not forget that "(t)he pleasure may be in company or connection with things infinite in variety" (Mill 1835, pp. 389-390): mental pleasures allow the emergence of such great connections, whereas it is not the case for the the bodily ones. If one pays attention to the idea that a difference of degree can become a difference in kind via the laws of associations, then the idea of pleasure is higher in kind compared to the pleasurable sensation, but the essence of all this remains pleasure.

This is not the end of the analysis. From an associationist point of view, a pleasurable sensation has necessarily antecedents or causes. How and why can we desire to know such causes? The answer is that our mind is deeply interested into the causes of pleasurable sensations than sensations themselves (James Mill 1829, vol. 2, p. 188). Provided we have a serious belief or idea of the remote causes of pleasures, indeed, these causes become to us pleasant in *themselves*, independently of their consequences. Such causes may be popular and risked if they render ourselves blind, such as wealth and power. But they may also be our

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that Jonathan Ryan (2010) draws on the idea of infinity in John Stuart Mill, who was very close to that of his father, but in order to claim the fundamental difference between John Stuart Mill's hedonism and the standard one in classical utilitarianism.

fellow-creatures.¹¹ Knowing that, like the mere instance of water, the causes may be associated with “infinite other ideas. We can then understand why John Stuart Mill considered his father “never varied in rating intellectual enjoyments above all others, even in their value as pleasures” (John Stuart Mill 1873, p. 50). Drawing implicitly on his father’s and Bain’s psychology, John Stuart provides a good synthesis of the idea according to which mental pleasure is superior to bodily one. “(T)hose persons, things, and positions, which are the causes or habitual concomitants of pleasurable sensations to us (...) become in themselves pleasant to us by association; and through the multitude and variety of the pleasurable ideas associated with them, become pleasures of greater constancy and even intensity, and altogether more valuable to us, than any of the primitive pleasures of our constitution” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 236; See also Quincy 1980, p. 469-470).

Let us come back now to the relation between calculation and pleasure. Bentham already remarked that the fact of expecting pleasure may be pleasurable in itself, independently of future consequences. “The pleasures of expectation”, he wrote, “are the pleasures that result from the contemplation of any sort of pleasure, referred to time future, and accompanied with the sentiment of belief” (Bentham 1823, pp. 36-37). In the terminology of James and John Stuart Mill, such pleasures would correspond to the *mental* ones. Indeed, it is because ideas are related to time, either backward-looking — remembering past states — or forward-looking — anticipating consequences from antecedents —, that we can contemplate any sort of future — or past — pleasures. Sensations, to the contrary, do not have such dimension in themselves. Returning to the mere instance of water, the fact of expecting to drink water in a desert is therefore a mental pleasure. It follows that the felicific calculus related to the mere instance of water implies at least mental pleasure. Nowadays, and in the times of the Mills, criticisms in the field usually neglected such a process, by rather focusing on the result of the calculus, that is, in our case, the corporeal pleasure generated by the fact of drinking water, provided the calculus is not misleading.

It still needs to underline a last but substantial point, that is, the fact that the calculation ought obviously to include other-regarding aspects to be moral. James Mill provided a good synthesis of what is a moral calculation, characterized by the following “requisite”: the agent ought to expect beneficial consequences from his act by having “a conviction of its general utility” (James Mill 1835, p. 321).

In a nutshell, the essential points shown in this part are the following:

- 1) Morality is a matter of calculation.
- 2) The role of pleasure is conclusive in their understanding of the decision process: pleasure determines action either directly as a sensation or indirectly as an idea.
- 3) There is a difference in kind, resulting from the laws of association, between a mental pleasure and a bodily one, but the essence is still pleasure.
- 4) Independently of its consequences after the intended action, the felicific calculus implies mental pleasure.
- 5) The calculation ought to incorporate other-regarding aspects to be moral.

Though it is possible that individuals remain animals, the Mills were convinced that all human beings were potentially, *in proper conditions*, progressive beings seeking excellence in

¹¹ I will come back and develop this point in the second part of the paper.

terms of pleasure. Their recipe sounds simple. The more experiences we get, the more associations of ideas we make, and therefore the more enlightened we are for being a “competent judge”¹² of our interest. The history of mankind is then successively built on “progressive” experience.¹³ And it is thanks to such experience that we can know that the fact of focusing only on bodily pleasures amounts to saying that we choose to remain animals (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 211).

2. Calculation and expediency

We have seen that morality emerges in the intended and foreseen consequences of our actions. Expediency is what allows to attain the desired ends. To do so, the role of virtues, especially that of prudence, is fundamental to have a good knowledge of the causes of pleasure, and therefore to rise the capacity of the felicific calculus to produce the desired ends (§2.1.). However, what is true for the distinction between pleasures seems also true for the distinction between the two following and different expediencies. When expediency is related narrowly to self interest, regardless of its effects on others, simple expediency is at stake (§2.2.), and is not related to morality. By contrast, when expediency includes other regarding aspects, general expediency is at stake (§2.3.), and is related to morality.

2.1. The causes of pleasure and the art of calculating

An individual who does not care about the consequences of his actions is an individual who cannot pursue a plan of actions. “Uncertain or certain”, John Stuart Mill wrote, “we are able to guide ourselves by them, otherwise human life could not exist” (John Stuart Mill 1852, pp. 180–181). From this point of view, pursuing a plan of actions without a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing – the consequences – makes no sense. How, then, can we properly follow the principle of expediency?

The “mother” of the ancient Greek virtues is first and foremost essential. Indeed, prudence allows “a correct foresight of consequences, a just estimation of their importance to the object in view, and repression of any unreflecting impulse at variance with the deliberate purpose” (John Stuart Mill 1843, p. 107). In a slight different way, James Mill insisted that this virtue allows to surely increase our interest, even if “in its common acceptation, it is more employed to denote the acts by which we avoid evils” (James Mill 1829, vol. 2, p. 282). Some years before, he employed the notion of “intelligence”, denoting the knowledge of nature’s events depending on pleasure and pain, but also of “temperance” for recalling the importance of controlling our desire (Mill 1819, p. 16). More generally, such virtues “acquire when duly cultivated, a power of controlling the solicitations of appetite, and are esteemed a more valuable constituent of happiness than all that sense can immediately bestow” (James Mill 1829, vol. 2, p. 366; James Mill 1805, p. 387; see also Loizides 2014, p. 310; and Robert Fenn, 1987, 176). They will contribute, in other words, to form and develop knowledge and the

¹² To my knowledge, James Mill did not use the phrase “competent judge”.

¹³ Again, I will come back and develop this point in what John Stuart Mill called “the general experience of mankind” (§3.2.).

character to go after the ‘great purposes’ of life, to pursue what one ‘deliberately approves’ (James Mill 1829, vol. 2, pp. 376-7; James Mill 1819, p. 15; see also Loizides 2014, p. 310; and Fenn 1987, p. 51). Anyway, besides the importance of not overestimating desire and to pursue what we deliberately approve, the knowledge of the hedonistic events of nature is obviously crucial for the felicific calculation, since it constitutes the informational basis through which we take our decision. This is why the matter of the causes of pleasure was crucial for the Mills.

Two kinds of causes of pleasure exist: the immediate, and the remote ones. From a Associationist point of view, the latter are more interesting and useful than the former, insofar as the remote causes include the immediate ones – they can be associated with the pleasures of almost every class. Food, for instance, is an immediate cause of pleasure. In a commercial society, the money with which I have bought the food is a remote one. Such reasoning may be reiterated in another class of pleasures. “The sound of the violin”, James Mill wrote, “is the immediate cause of the pleasure of my ear; the performance of the musician, the cause of that sound; the money with which I have hired the musician, the cause of that performance” (James Mill 1829, vol. 2, 187). An individual who cares about the art of calculating should anyway care about the different causes of pleasures, and above all, therefore, the remote ones: in a way, they give him informations about the experience of mankind. However, certain causes have a tendency to descend to self-centredness. Others, by contrast, have a more other-regarding aspect.

2.2. Simple expediency

Like many others, James Mill was already explicit enough on the field. “How completely are the lives of most men absorbed”, he wrote, “in the pursuits of wealth and ambition! With how many men does the love of Family, of Friend, of Country, of Mankind, appear completely impotent, when opposed to their love of Wealth, or of Power!” (Mill 1829, vol. II, p. 215). Some years later, John Stuart Mill will remark that the love of money and of power are usually the most persistent passions of human nature (John Stuart Mill 1869a, p. 220). To a point such as they can be desired for themselves, whereas they are mere remote cause pleasures.¹⁴ Power and wealth, thus, will constitute our instances of simple expediency here.

The case of power does not need to be developed a lot. What James Mill said about it makes echo to what his elder son said about the well-known case wherein he envisaged a minister sacrificing the well being of his nation for the sake of his own place in society (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 223). From the point of view of simple expediency, his calculation for assuring his place is good, though the action deteriorates general utility, and therefore is immoral.

The case of the pursuit of wealth is perhaps more delicate, since John Stuart Mill decided to make it a science of political economy, based on his concept of the economic man – concept which will be largely used in various scenarios afterwards –, acting from self-interested motives and without any reference to moral feelings. Without going into further obvious details, calculation plays a considerable part for accumulating wealth. In his *Elements*, James Mill already underlined our ability to calculate, through the prism of prudent saving, when he claimed that “There are two sets of men; one, in whom the reasoning power is strong, and

¹⁴ I will return to this point in the third part of this paper.

who are able to resist a present pleasure for a greater one hereafter; another, in whom it is weak, and who can seldom resist the charm of immediate enjoyment” (James Mill 1826, p. 52). This relationship with time, risky or not, also appears in John Stuart Mill, when he remarks that “the willingness of a ‘dealer’ to use his credit, depends on his expectations of gain, that is, on his opinion of the probable future price of his commodity” (John Stuart Mill 1848, Vol. 2, p. 554). The two men seem furthermore share the idea that the possession of great wealth does not contribute to individual excellence: “(T)he possession of a large fortune generally whets the appetite for immediate enjoyment” (James Mill 1826, p. 52), and “(T)he greatest part of the utility of wealth, beyond a very moderate quantity, is not the indulgences it procures, but the reserved Power which its possessor holds in his hands of attaining purposes generally” (John Stuart Mill 1848, vol. 1, p. 6). In other words, up to a certain point, wealth is power.

These cases show that simple expedient courses of action are not necessarily moral. But “there are different orders of expediency”, and “all expediencies are not exactly on the same level” (John Stuart Mill 20 May 1867, p. 152). General expedient courses of action have other-regarding aspects, and are therefore directly in relation to the domain of morality.

2.3. General expediency

A lot could be said about general expediency. Nevertheless, I focus here on the famous, though delicate, case of justice. My point is only to show that justice is subordinated to morality and is therefore closely related to calculation. I will be quick.

At first sight, John Stuart Mill seems to differ from the Benthamite tradition in viewing justice as an idea based on intense and absolute feelings not necessarily associated with utility (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 251). The complex sentiment of justice, indeed, based on a “natural feeling of retaliation or vengeance” extended, through intelligence and sympathy, to society as a whole, “has nothing moral in it” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 249). But he made clear afterward that justice is at the service of general utility by recalling the standard utilitarian views in the field. Justice allows to secure our rights, such as liberty and property, to give the possibility to change improper laws, and more generally to secure our expectations. John Stuart Mill provided a clear synthesis of his confidence in security. “(S)ecurity”, he wrote, “no human being can possibly do without; on it we depend for all our immunity from evil, and for the whole value of all and every good, beyond the passing moment; since nothing but the gratification of the instant could be of any worth to us, if we could be deprived of everything the next instant by whoever was momentarily stronger than ourselves” (John Stuart Mill 1861, pp. 250–1).¹⁵ We find here the idea that justice, and therefore security, is the necessary condition for having a “harmonious” life in society. Usurprisingly, James Mill, shared this view without reserve (see, for instance, James Mill 1820, p. 5). In Bentham’s words, “Without law there is no security; consequently no abundance, nor even certain subsistence (Bentham 1785-6, p. 307). In short, justice is calculated to secure our interest and that of others, and from there, the quest for excellence can become.

Surely the Mills believed that cases of general expediency are closely related to the “permanent interests of man as a progressive being” (John Stuart Mill 1869c, p. 224). In the

¹⁵ I will not deal with the possible conflict between justice and liberty in John Stuart Mill’s thought. What matters here, is that justice is far from being incompatible with the felicific calculus.

next and last part, we consider the domain of aestheticism, a domain that John Stuart Mill conceived important for the quest of excellence, but independently from considerations of interest. A closer and different look into the relation may nevertheless suggest a slight different story.

3. Calculation and aesthetics

What is noble, or beautiful, or aesthetic seems to contrast every courses rational courses of actions that we have seen above. According to the principle of aestheticism, actions are in themselves our only ends. We do not perform actions due to moral obligations, by expecting pleasure, but rather spontaneously, for their own sake. From an Associationist point of view, however, it is possible to explain this kind of actions in relation to calculation. To do so, I begin by remarking that Utilitarians were aware that the felicific calculus had boundaries and was not every time suitable (§3.1.). Though not perfect, they nevertheless thought that the calculation was perfectible via their faith in the teachings of experience. On this basis, John Stuart Mill talked about the general experience of mankind (§3.2.). At last, I claim that aesthetic actions may be explained through what I call a “perfect calculation” or “aesthetic” one : the object of calculation has so many times be strongly experienced and associated with, that what was desired for an end becomes desired for his own sake. In other words, we “perfectly” calculate things when we are not aware of calculating anymore (§3.3.).

3.1. The limits of calculation

It is not too much to say that the felicific calculus is not always adequate to every cases. There are indeed opportunity costs to calculating expected utility, limited information at the time of decision, knowing that calculations are often subject to familiar temporal and personal biases: these are well-known limits. What is less well-know is that Bentham himself acknowledged that – of course, not by using the same vocabulary. Better: he noticed that on certain occasions, the fact of always consulting the principle of utility could be dangerous (Bentham 1823, p. 5), though he was not clear about what these occasions are. And besides the fact that our ability to calculate is limited, the circumstances in which we take our decision can be complex and exogenous. Bentham devoted a lot of pages to these circumstances, and surely, a man whose a such developed love of details like Bentham was aware of a possible disconnection between the calculation – even enlightened – and its actual consequences. James Mill seems to follow the same path. “The consequences of an act”, he wrote, “may be such, that the person had no reason to anticipate them, or could not possibly anticipate them; or they may be such, that, though actually not foreseen, they might, with more or less of care, have been foreseen”. Unfortunately, like Bentham, his discussion comes to a sudden end, by remarking that “any further consideration of them is not within the province of this inquiry” (James Mill 1829, vol. II, pp. 400-401). Drawing on his father, John Stuart Mill will explicitly try to respond to the criticisms on the limits of the calculation.

3.2. The general experience of mankind as a way to improve our ability to anticipate the consequences of our action

We have previously seen that the knowledge of the ideas of the causes pleasures and pains adds depth to the felicific calculation. James Mill, besides, traced the origin of morality, and therefore of the felicific calculus, in the experience of mankind. It is because we have the usual experience with painful acts, or the cause of what was painful, from the pleasant acts, or the cause of what was pleasant, that we have distinguished moral acts from immoral ones (James Mill 1835, pp. 248-249). The experience of mankind is then, in the way of Nicolas de Condorcet, the key of the indefinite progress of the human mind. John Stuart Mill will reiterate and develop the argument in close relation to our ability to calculate, by replying to the numerous critics on the failures of the felicific calculus to guide human actions. His point of view was explicit enough in the field, and deserves to be underlined. "(D)efenders of utility often find themselves called upon to reply to such objections as this—that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness. This is exactly as if any one were to say that it is impossible to guide our conduct by Christianity, because there is not time, on every occasion on which anything has to be done, to read through the Old and New Testaments. The answer to the objection is, that there has been ample time, namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of actions; on which experience all the prudence, as well as all the morality of life, is dependent. People talk as if the commencement of this course of experience had hitherto been put off, and as if, at the moment when some man feels tempted to meddle with the property or life of another, he had to begin considering for the first time whether murder and theft are injurious to human happiness (...) mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better (...) The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the precepts of every practical art, admit of indefinite improvement, and, in a progressive state of the human mind, their improvement is perpetually going on. (John Stuart Mill 1861, pp. 42-43).

As the human mind, the felicific calculus is therefore indefinitely perfectible, but in two different ways, though not independent. Experience adds to calculation, either directly or indirectly. The more we feel sensations that we live directly in our life, the more we form complex associations of ideas, and the more we develop the felicific calculus. This is the usual associationist argument. But we can also learn mentally from the experience of mankind, even if we do not have experienced it directly in terms of sensations. The history of human mankind, experienced indirectly, is then at stake to improve the felicific calculus: this is an unusual associationist argument.

3.3. Calculating without being aware of calculating: toward an associationist conception of aestheticism

Though perpetually perfectible and therefore progressive, calculation cannot do everything. According to John Stuart Mill, if there is one area wherein calculation plays no role, it is the domain of aestheticism, which is supposed to reflect the intrinsic quality of our actions, regardless extrinsic considerations (John Stuart Mill 1865b, pp. 337-338; see also John Stuart Mill 1869b, pp. 650-651). In other words, according to the principle of aesthetics, there would be disinterested actions. The question is then how such actions emerge and are explained. Again, the answer paradoxically seems to appear in the wings of psychological associationism, and is closely related to the previous analysis concerning the remote causes of pleasures.

James Mill already observed that “when a grand cause of pleasures has been associated with a great many pleasures, and a great many times, the association acquires a peculiar character and strength” (James Mill 1829, vol. 2, p. 266), especially during our childhood. Like many authors having faith in education – in theory and in practice, as shown by the education he gave to his elder son –, James Mill believed that “the original features” of our temperament are being formed during our childhood (James Mill 1819, p. 31). Insofar as the greatest efficacy in the transition from sensations to ideas occurs when we undergo our first sensations – during childhood –, these original features give birth to the strongest habits in our life. Many examples may illustrate such remarkable phenomena during this period of life, such as the facility to learn a language or the remembrance of a melody. In time, thanks to the strength and the repetition of the associations, what was desired as a means to an end becomes an end in itself. Our remote causes of pleasures, being “inclosed in a web of associated ideas of pleasures or of pains at a very early period of life” could then be desired for their own sake: they become disinterested (John Stuart Mill 1843b, pp. 842-843; John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 238; John Stuart Mill 1869, p. 232; see also Loizides 2014, p. 313).

The “aesthetic”, though calculator, individual can then decide to follow two possible but very different directions. The first is self regarding, and the Mills remarked with regret that wealth or money constitute “one of the strongest moving forces of human life”. In time, money “is desired not for the sake of an end, but as part of the end” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 236). The second path we can follow is more other regarding, and therefore concerns morality. At the beginning, this supposes an effort, like when we try to improve our artistic passions. But, in time, again, we will desire virtue for itself, and then, “(a) man feels himself exempted from the obligation of calculating in such cases”. This is not because he does not calculate, or does not want to do it. In fact, “the calculation has already been made” (James Mill 1835, p. 163). This I think is the perfect form of the felicific calculus: this is an aesthetic one. We then understand why James Mill considered that it was “an abuse of language to call” aesthetic actions “beautiful or ugly” (James Mill 1835, p. 163): as strange as it sounds, they cannot be independent of a notion of calculation from a Associationist and Utilitarian point of view. Perhaps, James Mill’s *esprit de système* has pushed him to acknowledge this, whereas it is the so-called “romantic” revolution of his elder son that has pushed him to maintain, on principle, the existence of disinterested actions, but at the expense of the logical consistency of his associationist background.

Conclusion: “by happiness is intended pleasure”

We can then now conclude on the Utilitarian understanding of happiness. One can said that John Stuart Mill deviates from the standard conception by claiming that happiness consists in dignity, or in the general cultivation of nobleness of character, or more generally, that happiness is an art of life combining morality, expediency and aesthetism. Surely John Stuart Mill thought that disinterested actions matter in the art of life. But he still viewed the importance of a regulator in such art. Commenting George Grote's three volume survey of Plato's works, and observing that the measuring art – “metritiki technj” – is a usual topic in the dialogues related to the *Republic*, John Stuart remarked that “(o)ur life is to be regulated, but we are not told what it is to be regulated by”, and was surprised that Plato did not seriously consider the sovereign masters as the regulator in stake (John Stuart Mill 1867, p. 351; see also Quincy 1980, p. 460).

Anyway, independently of the different conceptions of happiness one may have, he made explicitly clear that we are rational human beings trying to pursue it, via the help of our ability to calculate. “Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy”, he claimed, “because sailors cannot wait to calculate the Nautical Almanack. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated; and all rational creatures go out upon the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of right and wrong, as well as on many of the far more difficult questions of wise and foolish. And this, as long as foresight is a human quality, it is to be presumed they will continue to do” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 225). Later and more explicitly, he said “that the truths of arithmetic are applicable to the valuation of happiness, as of all other measurable quantities” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 258). This shows that regardless what we include in happiness, the latter cannot be incompatible with calculation. Better: “happiness is intended pleasure” (John Stuart Mil 1861, p. 210), that which presupposes a calculation – through intention – compatible with the art of life, and especially rooted in the cultivation of mental pleasure, and not mere bodily pleasures.

We cannot reproach to John Stuart Mill his desire to fuse romanticism with rationalism, or to make a synthesis between deontology and teleology. He grew up during a period in which significant changes were occurring in the applied sciences and humanities. It was a time of innovation, exploration, and significant optimism. He had faith in the love of our fellow-creatures and the desire to be in unity with them. Like his father, he tought that they constitute “the origin of affections of the greatest influence in human life” (James Mill 1829, vol. II, p. 215).¹⁶ Nevertheless and anyway, the so-called “desinterested sentiments” or aesthetic actions have no priority in John Stuart Mill’s conception of the art of life. When they are in conflict with moral reason, indeed, the latter should have priority (John Stuart Mil 1861, pp. 220-221). An interesting case, though sensitive and delicate, is that of the death penalty. We should not forget that John Stuart Mill defended, in his parliamentary speech of 1868, the retention of capital punishment for the worst murderers on the grounds of a “mere” felicific calculus based on the arguments of frugality and exemplarity.¹⁷ Though he was convinced in the power of sympathy to care about our follow-creatures, let us not forget that his position

¹⁶ Besides, here appears the observation from which the golden rule can emerge: (t)o do as one would be done by, and to love one’s nighbour as oneself” (John Stuart Mill 1861, p. 218).

¹⁷ On the way in which John Stuart Mill’s position about death penalty differs from that of Bentham, see Benoît Basse (2013).

about death penalty shows that natural sentiments alone are impotent to regulate our art of life: the regulator remains the felicific calculus.

“Men calculate”, Bentham wrote, “some with less exactness [...] some with more: but all men calculate” (Bentham 1781, p. 188). After all, the basic objective of a Utilitarian education will be to make sure that such a calculation, which is in the quotidian of human beings and constitutes therefore a “psychological truth” (John Stuart Mill 1865a, p. 177), becomes a genuine felicific calculus. Though John Stuart Mill’s domestic education leads him to a well-known mental crisis, and though he put greater emphasis on the quality of pleasures and disinterested actions than his predecessors in his philosophical system, he still remained in the intellectual shadow of them, especially that of his father.

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