

# REMARKS ON THE ANCIENT DISTINCTION BETWEEN BODILY AND MENTAL PLEASURES

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The author tries to show that the old distinction between bodily and mental pains and pleasures, still maintained by many ethical writers, deserves to be forgotten. An analysis of the possible interpretations of this distinction leads to the opinion that people call mental those pleasures which they have in high esteem and that they treat as bodily pleasures the ones less approved. Thus the distinction which was expected to contribute to an elaboration of a hierarchy of values already implies one, and the statement that mental pleasures belong to a higher order is a mere tautology.

The distinction in European thought between bodily and mental pleasures or so-called pleasures of the senses and pleasures of the mind is, as is well known, due to Greek philosophy. It has been respected up to the present day by writers on ethics and is usually connected with the opinion that the latter belong to a better kind than the former. In this short paper we call in question both this opinion and the distinction upon which it is based.

We do not intend to discuss here when this distinction made its first appearance in Greek ethics. It was certainly known to the Cyrenaics, since Aristippus denied the greater worth of pleasures of the mind as compared with those of the body. "They consider bodily pleasures more valuable than those of the mind (*τῶν ψυχικῶν τὰς σωματικὰς ἀμείνονες εἶναι*)", writes Diogenes Laertius about the Cyrenaics, "and bodily pains worse than those of the mind". That is why, he writes later on, they think criminals are punished by the infliction of bodily pain.

Examples by which ethical writers of antiquity, and modern writers who inherited their conceptual framework, used to illustrate the distinction between bodily and mental pleasures and pains were rather poor and stereotyped. According to them, we have to do with a bodily or sensual pleasure in the case of pleasures of the palate or sexual pleasures, whereas pleasures derived from the recitation of poetry, from music or philosophic discussion would be mental. A head-ache

and the sensation of hunger or thirst would represent bodily pains, while we are expected to suffer mental pains in the case of an unrequited love or the anxiety caused by the illness of a near relative.

If someone were to attempt to cover these examples by a general formula, he would probably say that bodily pleasures and pains are derived from physical stimuli and can be sensibly localised in a definite part of our body, as is the case of pleasures of the palate and with pains caused by excessive heat or cold. The situation is different with the pain of humiliation or the pain derived from our confidence betrayed, and with the pleasure of hearing ourselves praised or the pleasure felt when we succeed in fulfilling an engagement in spite of unexpected difficulties. It is obvious that physical stimuli occur in these cases. A compliment we hear is voiced in sounds which affect our hearing; the quality, however, of these physical stimuli is irrelevant. It can as well be expressed in different words of the same language or in a different language and, provided these words are understood, produce the same effect, provoked not by the quality of the sounds but by their meaning.

The proposed general formula, however, encounters difficulties not easy to overcome. One of them is due to aesthetic sensations treated commonly as mental pleasures or pains, although the quoted formula — at least when simple aesthetic sensations are concerned — does not allow us to treat them in a different manner than bodily sensations. In fact, why should the pleasure of having a refreshing drink on a hot day be named a bodily one, while the delight derived from the scent of a meadow in bloom be attributed to the mind? This distinction is the more unwarranted, as smelling has such an important share in the pleasures of the palate. Why should he who takes delight in a harmony of colours be treated as a man having distinguished mental pleasures, while he who enjoys an artfully combined salad be expected to experience only a bodily pleasure?

We shall return once more to this symptomatic inconsistency at the end of our remarks. Meanwhile we should like to dwell a little longer upon the opinion attributing greater worth to the pleasures of the mind. This greater worth can be due to a greater *intensity* or to a different *quality* supposed to give to the pleasure a touch of "nobleness". Few people — we think — would support Aristippus' opinion that bodily pleasures as such are always more intense than those of the mind. Few would also probably support the contrary. On the scale of pleasantness and on the scale of painfulness, bodily

and mental pleasures will succeed one another without any regularity, and comparisons, if at all possible, would give rise to insoluble controversy. There are people who would prefer to have a tooth extracted than to give a bad lecture, while others would choose the contrary.

These are difficulties connected with the opinion that the greater worth of pleasures of the mind is to be attributed to their greater intensity. The position of those who attribute it to a difference of *quality* is still more difficult. Whoever derives pleasure from gossiping, from revenge or from a failure of his enemy, experiences a mental pleasure. As pleasure of the mind it should be more appreciable than the experience of a person who enjoys the taste of a ripe peach.

Here the partisans of the greater worth of pleasures of the mind will protest with indignation that when speaking of pleasures of the mind they never thought of cases like those enumerated above, but that they meant pleasures derived from research work, aesthetic contemplation, pleasures connected with friendship or with a clean conscience. If so, then the opinion about the more honourable position of the pleasures of the mind tacitly involves an important restriction: not all mental pleasures are more respectable, but only those which deserve approval. But then one is bound to think that pleasures *are called* mental only when they are considered to belong to a better sort, which shows that the opinion that pleasures of the mind have a higher position becomes a mere tautology. It is worth noticing that the belief in the superiority of mental pleasures was never connected with the advice of choosing them on every occasion, as nobody would advise a starving man to listen to a Mozart's symphony instead of eating. The pursuit of mental pleasures was recommended only in those cases where some preconditions were fulfilled.

While those who built a hierarchy of pleasures and pains, taking into account their *intensity*, referred generally to examples both of pleasures and pains and especially of physical pains, as they could be easier compared, the partisans of the greater worth of mental experiences in virtue of their *quality* quoted first of all instances of pleasures, as pleasures can be considered as more or less worth pursuing, while nobody, except the masochists, is expected to pursue pains. Since "nobler" means often just "more worthy of pursuit" and no normal man is expected to seek pain, there is not much sense in asking whether the pain of remorse is nobler than the pain of a man deprived of drinkable water following a shipwreck. If one can some-

times sensibly compare the nobleness of two kinds of pain it is usually due to accidental aesthetic associations. Because of these associations the pain of nostalgia can be considered nobler than the pain caused by indigestion.

The distinction of bodily pains or pleasures and that of mental pains or pleasures was meant to bring some order into our ethical thought and has been widely used until recent times. Yet it brings confusion rather than order. No ethical writer would agree that the pain evoked by the success of our rival is nobler than neuralgia. Thus in order to decide which pains or pleasures belong to the better sort it is not sufficient to point to their bodily or mental character, but it is necessary to have a ready hierarchy of values which would enable us to reject as noble the malicious pleasure felt in connection with our rival's failure or the pleasure derived from humiliating other people. Instead of contributing to the elaboration of a hierarchy of values, this widely accepted distinction implies already one which eliminates all disapproved pleasures of the mind from a comparison with bodily pleasures.

There is one, and we think, only one interpretation of the opinion attributing more worth to pleasures of the mind which can give it some sense. According to this interpretation this opinion is not to be understood literally, but simply as *an expression of sympathy with a definite type of man*. It is the sympathy with a man who enjoys thinking and reading, a man who is attracted by the beauty of things and who prefers the pleasure of interesting discussions with friends to the pursuit of gain. John Stuart Mill was thinking of this type of man and of these kinds of pleasures when, in the *Utilitarianism* he opposed "pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination and of the moral sentiments" to less valuable pleasures "of mere sensation". Having such a definite list of pleasures in view, ethical writers counterposed a man who was pursuing them with a thoughtless being absorbed only by the idea of having a good time. He certainly has also his "pleasures of the mind". But they do not belong to those recommended as worth pursuing, and as such do not deserve being called so.

We have mentioned above an inconsistency in treating simple aesthetic experiences when their "bodily" or "mental" character was concerned. This inconsistency can be easily explained when the distinction between "bodily" and "mental" pleasures is interpreted as a typological one. "Mental" pleasures are pleasures of noble men. A noble man can enjoy the scent of a meadow in blossom, but the pleasure

of excessive drinking is not his. That is why the first experience would be named pleasure of the mind, while the second pleasure of the body, although both are pleasures of "mere sensation" due to physical stimuli and localised in a definite part of our body.

Our remarks concerning the distinction of two differently valued kinds of pleasures were intended to show that this legacy of the past does not deserve to be respected any longer. Whoever insists upon learning which pleasant experiences are mental will, we think, come at last to the conclusion that they are those which are enjoyed by noble men. And since noble men are usually distinguished by their pleasures, a vicious circle seems hardly avoidable.