

Mill's distinction of higher and lower pleasures revisited

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The distinction between higher and lower pleasures is one of most important features of Mill's utilitarianism which marks the divergence of his moral theory from Bentham's. It is also one of the most controversial parts of Mill's utilitarianism. Despite being discussed extensively, the scholarship of Mill's distinction continues developing in recent years. Yet the continuously expanding literature does not seem to help Mill scholars reach satisfactory and widely accepted interpretations of Mill. In his book *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics*, Henry West draws readers' attention to the fact that Mill's position regarding higher and lower pleasures is in fact a combination of several related yet distinct claims. West's analysis marks a significant progress in Mill scholarship. It recognizes the core difficulty in interpreting and evaluating Mill and identifies the key to understand why it is so difficult for scholars to engage in an effective dialogue. Moreover, it provides a very useful framework of analysis. Following West, this paper first proposes a framework of analysis which further breaks down Mill's arguments into five components. It then uses this framework to compare and contrast different interpretations of Mill's discussion of the qualitative and quantitative difference in pleasure. By doing so, this paper aims to demonstrate that some of controversies regarding Mill's arguments on the distinction in fact can be answered by the findings of contemporary neuroscience. Meanwhile, the paper also aims to provide a platform for more effective dialogue between scholars in the hope that this will make the study on Mill's distinction of higher and lower pleasures move forward in a much faster pace than it was in the last few decades. The paper argues that the scholarship of the qualitative difference in pleasures is not just a philosophical debate; it has significant implication of practice and hence deserves more attention.