In response to critics who denounce the ethical theory of utilitarianism, or the "Greatest Happiness Principle" (Mill 10), as hedonistically “mean and grovelling” (6), John Stuart Mill dedicates much of his treatise Utilitarianism to amending the limited understanding of human happiness that these objectors seem to have. To redeem the doctrine, Mill defines human happiness as comprised of two facets: an ability to recognize a qualitative scale of pleasures and seek out the higher ones, and a compulsion for one to seek these pleasures not only for oneself but, moreover, for one’s fellow beings. Most significantly, I argue, utilitarianism finds its worthiness in aligning itself with an inherently social human nature where public and private interests and pleasures are inextricably interwoven.

To begin it is necessary to give a brief account of what utilitarian ethics entail and why they might be objectionable to certain thinkers. Mill defines the doctrine as that which “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain” (6, emphasis added). I observe here that Mill has a conception of the good that is tied to the emotion or experience of happiness; but also inversely that pleasure, as I will outline, is fundamentally rooted in an understanding of what is good.
To understand Mill’s defense first requires an understanding of how his detractors conceive of and define pleasure and what therein might make the happiness principle appear “mean and grovelling”. Quoting in part from another author, Mill differentiates between two factions of objectors to the doctrine: those who “denounce the theory as ‘impractically dry when the word utility precedes the word pleasure, and [those who denounce it as] too practicably voluptuous when the word pleasure precedes the word utility” (5). The dichotomy between these two accusations suggests their understanding of pleasure as a frivolity which is opposed to usefulness or duty, and sets the stage for further accusations that utilitarianism is therefore “a doctrine worthy only of swine” (6).

Mill’s response to this is to redefine – or rather, perhaps, clarify – what is meant by pleasure. To put it simply, Mill argues for the existence of qualitative levels of pleasure, and that human beings by nature are not only capable but require the cultivation of so-called “higher faculties” (7) and hence higher pleasures. He notes the absurdity “that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone” (7). These pleasures are called higher as contrasted to the simple needs and desires that his critics might have called frivolous, which are certainly relevant and important to human life but which do not encompass all its joys.

Evidently, Mill is interested not in a defense of frivolity or “the mere pleasures of the moment” to which these thinkers take objection (5), but in an argument that some pleasures are not necessarily frivolous or base. That Mill is so deeply concerned with “rescuing [utilitarianism] from this utter degradation” (5) indicates that he believes in an
external standard by which to judge the system; that is, if humans experienced
happiness only from supposedly frivolous endeavours, he would accept that there must
be a higher standard than pleasure towards which human life should tend. For that
reason, his clarification of what it means to feel pleasure and happiness, for humans
specifically, is vital.

This leads me to a brief discussion of the word “grovelling” and its implications.
To grovel is not only to indulge in so-called base pleasures – to grovel is also an
isolating act. One who grovels becomes a slave to his or her desires and ceases to
engage with the world except to beg for its comforts; the person withdraws into his or
herself. That this is far from the ideal which Mill promotes I take to mean that his vision
of the ends of a fully human life makes this slavish life undignified by comparison, even
though he never directly addresses such a teleology. The opposite of this state, then, is
engagement with the world, as opposed to simply living in it and accepting its sensual
pleasures.

Part of the “intrinsic superiority of the higher” pleasures (8) is the pursuit of social
endeavours; the social nature of human life thus has a crucial role in utilitarianism. Mill
considers the foundation of his morality to be “that of the social feelings of mankind,”
(27) which fact paves the way for Mill’s assertion that the utilitarian goal “is not the
agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether” (10).
Moreover, he argues that “[t]he social state is at once so natural, so necessary, and so
habitual to man, that ... he never conceives of himself otherwise than as a member of a
body” (27). Not only are we obligated to strive towards greater overall happiness, but
the obligation in fact arises from a natural and even inevitable tendency. Some of the
most profound happiness we can experience seems to arise, one way or another, from the social disposition of human beings; hence, all individual happiness becomes indelibly linked with the happiness of others.

To understand this I return to the idea of the higher faculties. We might think of endeavours such as art and philosophy as the quintessential uses of these faculties; more generally, Mill emphasizes the possession of “mental cultivation,” and a “lively ... interest in life,” claiming that “any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened ... finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind past and present, and their prospects in the future” (12). Common in all these is the pursuit of engagement with the world, of a kind which seems to be less experienced among other animals and is far from grovelling. Such engagement, though it is not necessarily social in nature, is nevertheless a reach towards unity with something outside oneself, a move which lends itself to the desire to increase the greater overall happiness.

Utilitarianism reconciles private and communal happiness by appealing to this desire for unity. The individual begins to experience this “higher” happiness; recognizes the social feeling and the desire to engage with the world; realizes a need to improve the lot of or promote happiness in that world; and then becomes part of the project of cultivating these feelings in others so that they, too, realize this need. In short, those who feel the higher happiness inevitably want that feeling to be shared. It is an ethics of education, where “education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an
indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole” (15). It is this fundamental link between the personal and the social which provides the basis of Mill’s book and the entire doctrine of utilitarianism.

Throughout the above, with the very use of the word “higher,” runs the thread of an assumption that there indeed exists a hierarchical scale of faculties; we therefore need to uncover Mill’s justification for or explanation of that scale. What it is that actually makes them higher; why should we hold certain pleasures in lower or in higher esteem? Mill states that the quality of pleasures is determined by those who have experienced both lower and higher pleasures and seem to unquestionably “give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties” (7). I concede that, in this line, Mill somewhat begs the question of what actually makes those faculties higher. However, in his emphasis on choice, I find him making this suggestion: that to be human is to experience the engaged, social faculties he explores later in his book, and that we come to know these faculties are fully human and thus more valuable because of the persuasive kind of happiness that they compel us to feel. Mill insists that “[w]hatever can be proved to be good, must be so by being shown to be a means to something admitted to be good without proof” (4) and that “the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it” (30). Happiness and desire are then ways of recognizing what kinds of actions human beings should pursue.

From this it seems we develop systems of morals, rights, and justice, for “the moral faculty, if not a part of our nature, is a natural outgrowth from it” (26). I’d venture that perhaps part of the objection to utilitarianism, then, is due to its approach to
morality, deriving morals and rights not extrinsically but from individual feelings. It might make some sense to object to a doctrine which claims that all rights can be sanctioned only socially, when we conceive of social consensus as changeable. Yet, from Mill I am led to conclude that if we recognize this fundamental utilitarian desire of all humans, that is, the desire for unity and for the experience of varying degrees of pleasure, then we find a kernel that is not as changeable as may be thought. The feeling of happiness is not truly a mystery to any person, and, consequently, I agree with Mill when he claims that it is “truly a whimsical supposition, that if mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would remain without any agreement as to what is useful” (20).

To a certain extent utilitarianism is thus an acknowledgement of the sources of that which humans already do, the reason for morals which are already in place in society. Mill claims that “the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, [is] happily one of those which tend to become stronger, even without express inculcation, from the influences of advancing civilization” (27). Significantly differing from a philosopher such as Rousseau, Mill suggests that civilization, while not a natural fact of human life, elicits qualities which, though they are not present in humans inherently, are compatible with those qualities which are. The pleasure we feel is simply how we recognize the value of these experiences.

By suggesting that pleasure can itself be a reminder of the social nature of humans, and thus a guide towards living a better life, Mill raises the doctrine of utilitarianism far above the level to which critics had initially judged it. From his
explanation arises a sense of a sort of inevitability to utilitarianism; moral conceptions of right and wrong are only improved through recognition of this basic human fact which is the search for personal happiness and the desire to share it with others.
Works Cited