



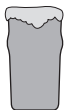
Mill v. Miller, or Higher and Lower Pleasures

Steven D. Hales

You may be confronted, as I am, with a bewildering array of beers lining the shelves of your favorite store. Fuller's ESB? Franziskaner Hefeweizen? Brooklyn Black Chocolate Stout? Arrogant Bastard IPA? Rogue Dead Guy Ale? Miller Genuine Draft? Once you have decided the style of beer you are in the mood for (or goes best with dinner, or would be appreciated by friends), there are two things to consider in making the momentous decision: price and taste. Complicating matters is that for the same money you might buy more of a lesser beer or less of a finer beer. A very tough decision. So what should the hapless and thirsty shopper do?

When it comes to offering advice on what you should do, you can't beat a moral philosopher. The nineteenth-century polymath John Stuart Mill considered thorny issues of just this sort, ultimately arguing that we should buy the better brew. He thought a better life was one spent enjoying a few pints of excellent ale, not one chugging kegs of fraternity-grade lager. I will argue that while defensible against the standard objections, Mill's views on quality are far-reaching and controversial, even for aficionados of quality. To see these things, though, we must first look a bit into Mill's general moral thinking.

Mill was a hedonistic utilitarian, meaning that he considered the highest good to be pleasure and that the consequences of our actions – to be measured in terms of the production of pleasure or pain – were all that morally matters. At any moment we are faced with all sorts of actions we might perform. Mill's view was that our moral duty is always to perform the action that has the best consequences of any of the actions available to us. Our duty, in short, is to increase the total



amount of pleasure in the world as best we can. It is evil to bring unnecessary suffering and good to minimize it.

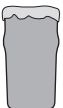
Utilitarianism is a beautiful and elegant theory. Armed with it we can determine what our moral duties are in every possible scenario. Should I rob a liquor store? Should I be a vegetarian? Should I double-park? Should I send my platoon to storm that hill? Should I finish writing this essay? Should I drink another beer? In every case I simply weigh out the pros and cons – the future pleasures and pains – of each possible action, and do the thing that will make the world a better, happier, place.

Sounds great, right? Well, really living the utilitarian life is not that easy. Just ask Peter Singer, the well-known utilitarian and public scold at Princeton, who thinks it requires that we make major changes in how we treat non-human animals and the poor. Singer argues on utilitarian grounds that it is wrong to use animals for food or experimentation, and that wealthy persons and nations have considerable duties of aid to the impoverished. There are various other concerns with utilitarianism, which legions of hard-working and contrarian philosophers have been all too enthusiastic to present in voluminous detail. Mill himself worried about the objection that utilitarianism is a moral philosophy fit only for pigs. He writes:

Now, such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure – no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit – they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English assailants. (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2)¹

Mill's response to the pig objection is obvious; "The Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable." Clearly human beings enjoy many pleasures that

¹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1979. First published 1863.

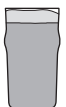


pigs do not, like the pleasures of literature, sports, films, music, and bottle-conditioned Belgian saison ales. So why would the comparison with swine be seen as degrading, as a real objection to utilitarianism? No doubt because the animal pleasures available to pigs are viewed as somehow inferior to the more elevated and refined pleasures of human beings. Human pleasures are better pleasures, and to think otherwise is to lower human beings to the status of pigs, rutting, slopping, and rolling in the muck.

Not everyone fears this fate, however. Mill's predecessor Jeremy Bentham famously denied that there were such differences in the quality of pleasures, and held that pig pleasures were every bit as worthy and admirable as human ones. Bentham's often misquoted line is that "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either" (*The Rationale of Reward*, bk. III, ch. 1).² Push-pin was a child's game much like tiddlywinks. In essence, Bentham is saying that there is no qualitative difference between beer pong and a Shakespearean sonnet, no qualitative difference between a Saturday night with a warm six-pack and NASCAR and an evening waltzing to Strauss. All that matters is the quantity of pleasure produced. Bentham embraced his inner swine. Mill, however, did not. Mill claimed that there are distinctions of quality among pleasures, and that pleasures might be better or worse in some way besides mere amount.

So how exactly can we determine which pleasures are the higher-quality ones and which are the lower-quality ones? Mill gives a test: take any two pleasures of equal quantity and poll people who have experienced both of them. The one that most people would prefer, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, is the higher-quality pleasure. In other words, the quality of pleasures is to be democratically determined by vote. Mill even claims that people would prefer a higher-quality pleasure to a lower-quality one, "even though knowing it [the higher-quality pleasure] to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, [he or she] would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of" (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2). In other words, no amount of a low-quality pleasure can trump

² Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*. London: J. and H. L. Hunt, 1825.



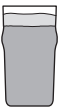
even a tiny amount of a high-quality pleasure, and no one would choose it.

Objection One: Lowbrow (or Löwenbrau) Preferences

The problem is that people often choose what seem to be lower-quality pleasures, even when higher-quality pleasures are available to them. For instance, beer aficionados are all familiar with untutored friends who would prefer to have a can of Budweiser than, say, a snifter of Ommegang's Three Philosophers quadrupel, even if both are available. What can possibly explain such behavior? Mill seems to think that everyone would choose a mere sip of Three Philosophers over a whole case of Bud. Yet he is obviously wrong – people often choose the lower quality.

Mill is perfectly aware that people make such irrational choices, and he has two explanations. The first is the *Competent Judges* reply. Anyone who would rather have a Coors Lite instead of a La Fin du Monde by Unibroue is an incompetent judge of beer – he is not someone who has *really* tried both. A single sip does not turn one into a beer authority; one must spend some time and effort to acquire a discriminating palate. Likewise a stroll through the Louvre does not make one an art critic, nor does attendance at a Boston Pops concert make one a musicologist. If one is not a competent judge, Mill argues, then one is not eligible to vote on the quality of a particular pleasure. This makes good sense. If one is planning to buy a new bicycle, pick a new novel to read, get a copy of Mahler's Second Symphony, or just about anything else, one wants the advice of knowledgeable cyclists, readers, and classical music buffs. Why poll the ignorant?

Mill's second rejoinder is the *Weakness of Will* response. Even if one is a competent judge and has full knowledge of the superior pleasure, one might still pick the lower-quality one. Mill notes that sometimes the lower-quality pleasure is just *easier* to achieve, and one might not feel like making the effort to attain the higher-quality pleasure. Mill aridly comments that "men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, even though they know it to be the less valuable . . . they pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, although perfectly aware that health is the greater good"



(*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2). If I am perusing my bookshelf, looking for a read, I might pick a Robert B. Parker mystery rather than the latest by Richard Powers. Sure, Parker is a bag of buttered popcorn and Powers is a five-course meal at the Ritz, but the pleasure of Parker is easily accessible, quick, and effortless. Mill is probably right; to knowingly choose the lower pleasure is a character deficiency.

Objection Two: Elitism

Even if Mill can explain away lowbrow preferences, one can't help but wonder if there is a bit of superciliousness involved. After all, Mill was a guy who began his formal education at age two, read Greek at three, knew Latin by the time he was four, and had a substantial knowledge of classical and historical literature by the time he was eight. Mill's idea of a party night out was probably attending a performance of Mozart's *Così fan Tutte* followed by claret at the club and a couple of chapters of Plato's *πολυτεία*. Indeed, Mill offers "pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments" as examples of the higher quality. It is hard to picture Mill at the bar of his local pub, quaffing a few pints of bitter and throwing darts with his mates. Indeed, Mill expert Alan Ryan of Oxford comments, "Mill is not known to have entered a pub ever in his life."³ In other words, one suspects that behind talk of "higher pleasures" there lurks an upper-class Victorian snobbery that looks down its aquiline nose at the baser pleasures of the proletariat. A beer-drinking workingman might be well moved to dismiss Mill as Little Lord Hoity-Toity, telling the masses how to live. Perhaps it is best to side with Bentham – the amount of pleasure is all that matters, no matter what its source.

Mill does not consider this objection, and so I offer a response on his behalf. Elitism is a danger only if Mill enumerates those pleasures or kinds of pleasures that are "higher" ones and those that are "lower." Although he is clearly tempted to do so, Mill need not start giving lists that would be immediately subject to criticism from the egalitarians. Instead, the right response to the elitism objection is to insist that *any* sort of pleasure can be assessed in terms of quality. Both Plato and porter can be evaluated in terms of quality – *Symposium* is a higher-quality

³ Personal correspondence.



Platonic dialogue than *Philebus* (which is unfortunately didactic and humorless) and Stone Smoked Porter is of higher quality than Saranac Caramel Porter (which is regrettably thin and watery). There is no reason that Mill must insist that Plato, *tout court*, is better than porter, *tout court*, no matter how tempting it is for the snobs. Evaluation of the quality of pleasures is within a kind, not across kinds.

There is a bit of a residual problem about generality, though. I have recommended that we rank-order all pleasure within a type, so that a beer may be better or worse than another beer, but it is senseless to insist that beer is qualitatively better than wine, Platonic dialogues, country living, ballet, or the current President. Yet how fine-grained shall we make our comparisons? Is it legitimate to order by quality Sam Adams Lager, Guinness, Ayinger Celebrator Doppelbock, and Hoegaarden? Or is it only fair to compare a stout to a stout, a pilsener to a pilsener, and so on? And if we must compare a stout to a stout, what about even finer grained divisions – should we only compare Samuel Smith’s Oatmeal Stout to another oatmeal stout or may we judge it against dry stouts, imperial stouts, milk stouts, and chocolate stouts? These are not easy questions. Problems of generality, vagueness, line-drawing, and whether nature can be carved at the joints range across the whole of philosophy, and cannot be solved here. Nevertheless, even if not all the details are ironed out, the solution to the elitism objection is to equitably maintain that for each kind or type of pleasure, there are pleasures of higher and lower quality.

Objection Three: Equivocation

Even if Mill’s ideas about quality are not necessarily elitist, many think that his method of determining the quality of pleasures – namely by asking people who are knowledgeable about the pleasures under consideration which ones they prefer – is a hopeless logical bungle. Mill writes, “the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it” (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 4). This treatment of quality has been savaged by logicians who claim that Mill has made an elementary error: that of equivocating between the desired and the desirable. Polling people to see which pleasures they prefer will tell you only what is in fact desired. It will not tell you which pleasures are *desirable*.



The charge of equivocation is not the knockdown objection that Mill's detractors maintain. Polling the competent judges *is* a reliable way of finding out about the relative quality of things (objects, events, activities, etc.). The competent judges are not always right, but one is still likelier to discover some fine beers to sample by reading the books written by Michael Jackson, Garrett Oliver, and Bob Klein than by asking Cletus the slack-jawed yokel. At this point we may ask a question analogous to one that Plato posed in *Euthyphro*: are pleasures desirable because the competent judges desire them, or do the competent judges desire them because they are desirable?

Suppose it is the former: pleasures are desirable because the competent judges desire them. This means that their desire actually *makes* something desirable, a view that does seem to erase any distinction between the desired and the desirable. However, there are at least three difficulties with this view. The first is the very nature of desire. We desire, love, and wish for things because of their desirable properties. Those things are antecedently desirable, which explains why we desire them. It is seriously strange to suppose that something gains its desirable qualities after we begin to desire it. The second difficulty is that if pleasures are desirable because the competent judges desire them, then there literally is *no reason* for the competent judges to prefer one thing over another. If it is Michael Jackson's love of Chimay abbey-style ale that makes that beer desirable, or Bob Klein's love of Rogue Shakespeare Stout that makes it desirable, then their love of those beers is fundamentally *arbitrary*. In other words, if certain beers are not desirable due to their objective properties, then desiring them is groundless and random. The third difficulty is that the competent judges could change their mind at any minute and decide that Schlitz Malt Liquor is the finest beer ever made. If they were to do so, Schlitz Malt Liquor would immediately *become* the best beer in the world. If you want to insist that such a thing could never happen, or that anyone who so judged would no longer be a competent judge, then you are implicitly assuming that there are objective facts about beer quality to which any competent judge must be sensitive.

In short, it is a mistake to hold that pleasures are desirable because the competent judges desire them. Far more reasonable is the view that competent judges desire certain pleasures because those pleasures are antecedently desirable, and the judges, informed and educated about that kind of pleasure, are able to reliably detect the qualities that make



those pleasures desirable ones. Audiophiles have trained themselves to hear amplifier distortion, speaker boxiness or coloration, listen for low-end rolloff in the audible range, and other factors that determine the desirableness and relative quality of a stereo system. Beer aficionados have learned to distinguish various flavor components in beer along with their balance, proportion, and intensity, and are sensitive to the role that density, carbonation, and temperature play in mouthfeel and taste. Philosophy journal referees have learned to detect clever or fallacious argumentation, tight writing, originality, timeliness and other attributes that determine the quality of an article submitted for publication. These are all objective factors that serve to determine the quality of beer, stereo systems, philosophy articles or any other pleasure. Far from naïvely equivocating, Mill accurately points out that when experts uniformly desire something, this is an excellent and trustworthy indicator that the object of their desire is in fact desirable.

Objection Four: Inconsistency

The fundamental utilitarian tenet is to produce as much pleasure in the world as we possibly can. Our moral duty is to do so. But now Mill is telling us that quality is important too. How can we possibly promote as much pleasure as possible, and also as much high-quality pleasure as possible? It's like telling someone to read as many books as possible, but also read as many good books as possible. Well, which is it? Reading Proust's epic *In Search of Lost Time* may satisfy the latter injunction but not the former. Reading a dozen romance novels over the same amount of time would satisfy the former injunction but not the latter. So should I read as many books as possible (the romances) or as many good books as possible (Proust)?

I can only partially save Mill from the inconsistency objection. Mill seems to suggest that it is better to have a small quantity of a high-quality pleasure than a large quantity of a low-quality pleasure. "Better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied," he writes (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2). Mill is just wrong about this, and it cannot be defended. Nevertheless, even if we defend the position of hedonistic utilitarianism that our moral duty is to produce as much pleasure in the world as is possible by our actions, there is still room for promoting quality as well.



Suppose that you could perform either an action X or an action Y, and both are superior to any other action you might do, but are tied with each other. Commonly, utilitarians say that it is then morally indifferent which you do; as long as you do either X or Y, just pick one. I recommend on Mill's behalf that instead when there is a tie in quantity of pleasure produced, we ought to choose the action that produces the higher-quality pleasure. Under this interpretation – when there is a tie in quantity of pleasure, go for quality – Mill's promotion of quality is far from innocuous. In fact, I believe that Mill's view is a substantive and radical proposal about how we ought to live. To make this clear, we will have to develop a more explicit positive theory of quality, one that shows precisely how the quality of pleasures is related to their quantity and explains the sort of life Mill advocates when he recommends the promotion of high-quality pleasures.

The Density of Pleasure

In a slogan, this is the notion of quality that I will defend: *quality is the density of pleasure*. Consider two fishing trips. On fishing trip A you fish all day, pulling up one modest fish after the next. There is always something on the line, so you never get bored and there is always a little thrill. But at the same time you don't really catch anything particularly noteworthy. On fishing trip B you fish all day and only catch one fish – but it is a monster. It takes all your skill and cunning to boat the giant lunger, but you eventually do. It does not take much imagination to suppose that the total amount of pleasure attached to both fishing trips is the same; we can even suppose that the total weight of edible meat is identical. The quantity of pleasure associated with the string of fish from trip A is identical with the quantity of pleasure represented by the string of fish from trip B; it is just that there is only one fish on the string in the latter case. Other things being equal, A and B are equally good choices as far as the quantity of pleasure is concerned.

Trip B has one key thing going for it: the giant lunger. This is a higher-quality fish than any of the ones caught on trip A, in fact that single fish is as good as the entire string from trip A. How should we understand this higher quality? Precisely as the density of pleasure: there is more pleasure concentrated in the lunger than in any of the other fish. Mill's recommendation that when quantity of pleasure is



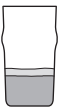
tied we should pursue high-quality pleasures, means in this instance that we ought to prefer fishing trip B to trip A. Given a choice between the two fishing outings, we ought to choose B.

This interpretation of quality well accords with our ordinary intuitions and I believe once we start thinking about quality in this way, we can see that it is ubiquitous. However, the pursuit of high-quality pleasures has its risks. Suppose that Jane has \$30 to spend on a case of beer. (In Pennsylvania, where I live, state law requires that the minimum beer purchase is a case. We also have the most moronic, oppressive, and ill-considered liquor laws in the United States.) Jane is debating whether to spend her \$30 on two cases of Coors Extra Gold pilsener or one case of Pilsener Urquell.

According to Bob Klein's *The Beer Lover's Rating Guide*,⁴ Coors Extra Gold is "sharp, light, and tasteless . . . it quickly subsides into a typical pedestrian brew, even on a summer picnic with cold cuts and salads. Touted as a 'full-bodied beer' – yes, in comparison to Coors' regular pilsener." On a scale of 0 to 5, Klein rates Coors Extra Gold 1.8, which means it is below average and suitable only for the extremely thirsty. Pilsener Urquell, on the other hand, is the ur-beer for the pilsener style, and has been brewed in Pilsen, Czech Republic, for over 160 years. According to Klein, it is "crisp, fresh, and mustily hoppy pleasant, understated aroma; intensely carbonated; floral mouthfeel contains some bitterness, but it is subtle and well-calibrated; admirable textural strength; slides into tempered sweetness with spicy foods; a first-class beer to be enjoyed in multiples." Klein rates it 3.5, which is the middle of the above average range. If we assume that taste is objective, Klein is a competent judge of beer, and that Klein's rating system is linear, then Pilsener Urquell is about twice as good as Coors Extra Gold. Under these assumptions, Jane's choice is to buy two cases of Coors or half as much Pilsener Urquell, which tastes twice as good. The cost is the same, and the total quantity of pleasure to be produced is the same. How is Pilsener Urquell a higher-quality beer than Coors? There is twice as much pleasure per bottle.

If Jane follows Mill's recommendation that one ought to pursue higher-quality pleasures, then she will spend her \$30 on Pilsener Urquell.

⁴ R. Klein, *The Beer Lover's Rating Guide*. New York: Workman Publishing, 2000, 2nd ed.



Complicating matters is the fact that beer neophytes are unable to appreciate the subtle nuances of fine craft beers to the same extent as the connoisseurs. The neophytes are sensitive to the fact that some beers taste better than others, but cannot understand the magnitude of differences, or the presence of the truly excellent as opposed to the merely superior. Conversely, a casual beer drinker will be more willing to knock back a corporate brew, and more likely to get a little pleasure out of it, than someone who consumes only cask-conditioned ales pulled from an English beer engine. Analogous things are true of other sorts of pleasures, whether it is food, antiques, literature, tennis racquets, movies, travel, romantic trysts, jazz, or Platonic dialogues. As one becomes more informed and more expert, one gains a finer appreciation for the high end while losing the ability to be satisfied with the low end. The recognition of quality comes at a cost.

Suppose that Jane Pivo, a beer enthusiast, and Joe Sixpack, who is just enthusiastic, decide to drink beer together every night for a month. Their financial resources are limited, so they cannot afford artisanal craft beer every night. Most nights they will be forced to drink mass-produced beer, but once in a while they splurge and drink the top-shelf stuff. Jane gets very little pleasure on the nights when they drink Pabst Blue Ribbon and very great pleasure the evenings they share an Allagash Curieux ale aged in bourbon barrels. Joe likes Pabst just fine, although he is not a complete idiot and enjoys the Allagash a bit more. On an average night, Joe is having a better time than Jane as they have a Busch, Miller, Coors, Schlitz, or Keystone Lite. But on the splurge nights, when they sample a Dogfish Head 120 Minute IPA, Aventinus Weizenbock, or Delirium Nocturnum, Jane gets far, far more out of it than poor Joe. Their month of tasting can be presented graphically (Figure 7.1).

For the month, Jane totaled 300 units of pleasure and so did Joe. Thus, from a purely quantitative standpoint, it is no better to be informed and knowledgeable about beer than not. Jane received no more pleasure than did Joe over the course of the month. Joe's pleasure was more frequent and more evenly spread out, whereas Jane's beer-induced pleasure was rarer and more concentrated. Obviously, this example and diagram is an idealization, but no more than any utilitarian calculation. The virtue of this way of presenting matters is that it brings out clearly the sort of life that Mill thinks is the morally optimal one.

Mill's view on quality is that we should live our lives like Jane Pivo – we should become knowledgeable about various pleasures, pursuing



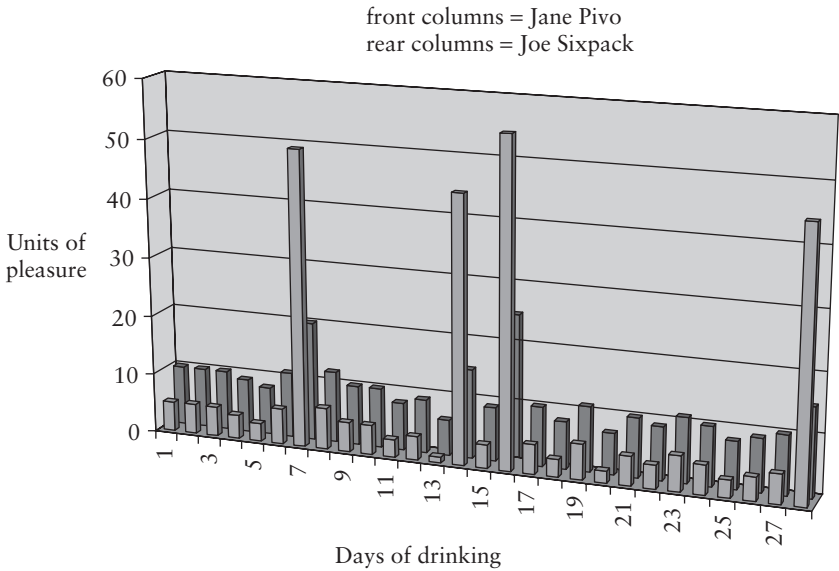


Figure 7.1 Jane and Joe's month of drinking

and promoting them. When confronted with two courses of action that produce the same quantity of pleasure, we ought to pursue the one with the higher-quality, concentrated pleasures, even knowing that it is at the expense of enjoying lower-quality ones.

Mill's recommendation here should be tremendously controversial; it is not some innocuous, modest view that every sensible person would obviously hold. Consider Jane. She might well wonder whether becoming a beer aficionado was worth it; after all she and Joe Sixpack drank all the same beers and on most nights Joe had a better time. Why isn't it perfectly reasonable for her to wish, as she sips an Old Milwaukee, that she could enjoy it as much as Joe?

One lesson here is that the appreciation of high-quality pleasures is certainly worthwhile when the cost of gaining those pleasures is low. If Jane and Joe both had unlimited resources and could afford to drink only the finest beers every night, then clearly Jane is better off. She will get more pleasure out of each beer, and since she will never drink a low-grade beer again, will end up with more total pleasure than Joe. Some pleasures are like this, even for the poor. Fine literature, for example, is in great abundance at public libraries and is available



for low or no cost. There is no concomitant downside to learning to appreciate great literature, since it is free for the taking and in a supply greater than anyone could read in a lifetime. With the advent of digital music files that are easily shared, music is becoming like literature, where the abundance of inexpensive music is so considerable that we are well advised to seek out and grasp the higher quality. Music and literature are a vast *prix fixe* buffet – there is no point in loading up on the jello with mini-marshmallows when one could have the filet mignon instead. In these contexts, the pursuit of high-quality pleasures will lead to greater overall quantity, and the fundamental tenet of hedonistic utilitarianism is that we should perform those actions that produce as much pleasure as possible.

The controversy is in cases where either (1) the high-quality pleasures are in short supply, or (2) they are expensive or difficult to obtain. In such instances one might prefer to remain in ignorance and not become sensitive to and appreciative of the subtle nuances that make for fine art, desirable first editions, highland single malts, or super sports cars. I am certainly a competent enough judge to tell that the pleasure of owning and driving a Lamborghini is higher quality than my 10-year-old Saturn, but is it really in my self-interest to become too aware of the difference?

In the end, Mill's insight that there can be a quality to pleasure as well as quantity is, when interpreted as the density of pleasure, an entirely coherent and challenging proposal. Far from being elitist, his views are ones that beer lovers can embrace – as a relatively inexpensive pastime, it is far less costly to become a beer connoisseur like Jane Pivo than it is to become an oenophile who is dissatisfied with anything less than a \$100 bottle of estate Bordeaux. Within our means, Mill is right – let us pursue high-quality pleasures. But we ought to be guarded about the appreciation of high-quality pleasures that are tantalizingly beyond our grasp, or only occasionally available to us. In these cases, perhaps ignorance is bliss.⁵

⁵ Thanks to Richard Brook, Gary Hardcastle, Tim Johnson, Jason Kawall, Vanessa Klingensmith, Wendy Lee, and Lynn Medalie for helpful comments on earlier versions.

