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# No Philosophy for Swine: John Stuart Mill on the Quality of Pleasures

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I argue that Mill introduced the distinction between quality and quantity of pleasures in order to fend off the then common charge that utilitarianism is ‘a philosophy for swine’ and to accommodate the (still) widespread intuition that the life of a human is *better*, in the sense of being *intrinsically* more valuable, than the life of an animal. I argue that in this he fails because in order to do successfully he would have to show not only that the life of a human is preferable to that of an animal on hedonistic grounds, but also that it is in some sense nobler or more dignified to be a human, which he cannot do without tacitly presupposing non-hedonistic standards of what it means to lead a good life.

Much has been written about John Stuart Mill’s distinction between quantity and quality of pleasures, but no consensus has been reached about its coherence and tenability, or lack thereof. Early critics of the distinction, such as Green,<sup>1</sup> Bradley<sup>2</sup> and Moore<sup>3</sup> who all argued that the distinction defied Mill’s professed hedonism, are often rebuked today for their allegedly ‘misdirected and insubstantial’ criticism of Mill.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me, though, that their objections hit the mark perfectly. The object of this article is to show, by going through his argument step by step and highlighting the import of certain passages that have hitherto been widely ignored, that Mill fails to achieve what he set out to achieve, namely to defend utilitarianism against the (at that time) potentially fatal charge that it is a philosophy ‘worthy only of swine’.

## I. INTRODUCING QUALITY

The distinction between quantity and quality of pleasures is introduced in the second chapter of Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, in which he explains what utilitarianism is and where he responds to several objections that

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hill Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, 5th edn. (Oxford, 1906), pp. 183–90.

<sup>2</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1927), pp. 116–22.

<sup>3</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 77–81.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Donner, ‘Mill’s Utilitarianism’, p. 264, *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 255–92.

have been raised against it. One of these is based on a then common reaction to the idea that pleasure and freedom from pain are, as the utilitarian creed holds, the 'only things desirable as ends'.<sup>5</sup> There must have been quite a few of Mill's contemporaries to whom this axiological assumption appeared implausible on the grounds that surely there are 'better and nobler' objects of desire and pursuit than pleasure. To suppose otherwise can only be 'mean and grovelling', for in doing so the utilitarian seems to imply that human beings are in no way better than animals and should, and can, only pursue the same ignoble ends as they do. Thus, it is claimed, utilitarianism is 'a doctrine worthy only of swine'.

What Mill needs to do in order to refute this objection is to show that, even though perhaps not *all* pleasures are noble and good (that is, worthy of being desired and pursued by a human being), there are *some* that definitely are, and to the greatest possible extent, so that there is in fact nothing better and nobler to desire and pursue than those pleasures.

Mill begins to launch his counter-argument by making the fairly obvious point that humans are capable of *other* pleasures than swine. Moreover, not only are they capable thereof, but these other pleasures are also constitutive of their well-being and happiness. In other words, in order to be happy a human being requires other things, and perhaps more things, than a swine does. 'Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification.'<sup>6</sup> So a human life that is rich in animal pleasures but contains none or few of these other pleasures that are specifically human would, all things considered, not be a happy life after all. Something important would be missing in such a life, and would also be *felt* as missing. Since happiness, for the utilitarian, is nothing but pleasure this can only mean that despite frequent bouts of intense pleasure, caused by the ongoing gratification of animal desires, some displeasure will eventually creep in and shift the overall balance of pleasure and pain toward the latter. Thus we may enjoy having good sex and good food as often as we like, but if there is nothing else in our lives we will, after a while, more likely than not become bored and depressed. Because of the way we are constructed, we require other, specifically human pleasures in order to become, and remain, satisfied with our lives and thus happy.

<sup>5</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (CW), vol. 10, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto and London, 1969), p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, pp. 210–11.

So far Mill's reply is not only fairly plausible, but also entirely consistent with his professed hedonism. There is no need for there to be only one kind of pleasure. If human pleasures are (partly) different from animal pleasures, not only in the sense that they derive from different sources (for instance reading a book, which is unlikely to please a pig), but also in the sense that they have a different intrinsic phenomenological quality, then we can acknowledge the existence of different *kinds* of pleasure without compromising our hedonistic theory of life and value. It does seem, after all, that the pleasure we derive from eating when we are hungry is not of the same kind as the pleasure we derive from reading a good book. The two pleasures may well be equally intense, and endure for an equally long time, but may nonetheless be different in the way they are experienced. In that sense we can then speak of different *qualities* of pleasure. If we accept this, then utilitarianism is clearly no philosophy 'worthy only of swine' in the sense that it recognizes only those pleasures as desirable that swine are capable of experiencing. So utilitarians should have no difficulty in agreeing with their critics' insistence that humans are not swine.

## II. HIGHER AND LOWER PLEASURES

However, this assurance does not quite meet the concern that is expressed in the objection. In order to counter the objection, it needs to be shown not only that utilitarianism allows for a *difference* between human and animal pleasures, but also that human pleasures are in some way higher, better or nobler, that is, more worthy of being desired and pursued (not merely for humans because of the way they are constituted, but *in themselves*) than animal pleasures. It is not sufficient to recognize that humans and animals are different with respect to the kinds of pleasure they seek and require. In addition, it must be shown that those pleasures are not merely different in kind, but also in *value*.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the life of a human being who enjoys plenty of specifically human pleasures has to be not only different from that of a swine (which enjoys plenty of swine pleasures), but it must also be *in itself* better, i.e. more worthy of being lived. This would mean that if I could choose between the life of a human and the life of a swine,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, p. 184: 'No one of course can doubt that pleasures admit of distinction in quality according to the conditions under which they arise. So Plato and Aristotle distinguished pleasures incidental to the satisfaction of bodily wants from pleasures of sight or hearing, and these again from the pleasures of pure intellect. . . . The question is in what sense, upon the principle that pleasure is the ultimate good by relation to which all other good is to be tested, these differences of kind between pleasures may be taken to constitute any difference in the degree of their goodness or desirability.'

I would be well advised to choose that of a human.<sup>8</sup> And if the swine had the opportunity to become human, it too, if it knew what was good for it, would no doubt do so. For it is better to be a human than a swine.

This is the consideration that Mill tries to accommodate within the framework of utilitarianism by making the bold move of introducing the idea of different *qualities* of pleasure. That two pleasures have a different quality does not mean that they *feel* differently (i.e. that they have different phenomenological qualities), but instead that certain kinds of pleasure are (in some unspecified way) *superior* to others. He explicitly mentions three such kinds, the ‘pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments’,<sup>9</sup> to all of which, Mill believes, we rightly assign ‘a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation’. This higher value is independent of the pleasure’s circumstantial, or quantitative, properties. While a pleasure of the intellect (such as reading a book, or, presumably, an academic article on Mill) may be far less intense than a bodily pleasure (such as, say, having a sexual orgasm), it will still be superior to it, and intrinsically ‘more valuable’. Mill claims that this statement is ‘quite compatible with the principle of utility’ (and, we may assume, also with the underlying doctrine that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends).

*Problem no. 1: quality as a place holder*

But what exactly does Mill mean when he says that one pleasure can be qualitatively superior to another, i.e. ‘more valuable’, regardless of its quantitative properties? Normally, when we talk about the quality of things in an evaluative sense, we can account for alleged differences in quality by referring to differences in quantity (in a wide sense). For instance, a car can be said to be of a higher quality than another if it lasts longer, is more robust or elegant, faster, easier to handle, safer, etc. This means that we can spell out what makes it a better car. But what makes an intellectual pleasure better (more desirable and valuable) than a pleasure of the senses? In what *way* is it better? Unfortunately, Mill never answers this question directly. He doesn’t even try. Instead, he tells us that the better of two kinds of pleasure is the one to which

<sup>8</sup> The situation would thus be similar to the one that the dead face after each life cycle according to the myth of Er that Plato relates in the last book of the *Republic*. However, for Plato it appears to be less certain than for Mill that being human is preferable to all other life forms. Being completely free to choose any form of life they desire for their next incarnation, Plato’s dead each make a different choice. Although there are some animals who decide to become human, there are also, contrary to what Mill should expect, many humans who elect to become an animal. Orpheus, for instance, chose to spend his next life as a swan, the Telamonian Ajax as a lion and Agamemnon as an eagle. At least for now, they have all had enough of being human.

<sup>9</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, p. 211.

those who are familiar with both (for instance all who have read, and are willing to discuss, Mill) 'give a decided preference, irrespective of any moral obligation to prefer it'. However, this is a rather strange and unsatisfactory answer for various reasons. The main problem with it is of course that it does not tell us what we wanted to know, namely what precisely it is *by virtue of which* a certain kind of pleasure can be said to have a higher value than another.

Suppose someone declared a certain kind of car far superior in quality than all others. Since you know nothing whatsoever about cars you ask him what he means by that. The answer you get is the following: 'Of two cars, if there is one to which all or almost all people who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable car.' This would mean, in practice, that if you want to know which car is best, you should ask your local car dealer. However, since your local car dealer will not always be inclined to tell you what he really thinks is the better car, you may want to see instead what car he is driving himself. By this method you may actually end up buying a decent, high-quality car. Yet even if you trust the judgement of the presumed expert, you will still assume that your new car is not better because it is being preferred by the expert, but rather that it is being preferred by him because it is the better car. In other words, it is not the car dealer's judgement that *makes* it a better car.

Similarly, we must assume that if those who are familiar with two kinds of pleasure consistently prefer the one to the other, then there is something in those pleasures that distinguishes them and makes one of them more desirable than the other. However, the problem is that Mill does not tell us what this something is. The alleged difference in quality is not tangible in any way and remains obscure throughout the argument.<sup>10</sup> The word 'quality' is in fact nothing but a place-holder, an *x*, a *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and just as elusive and indeterminable as Kant's *thing-in-itself*. To suggest (as Mill no doubt does<sup>11</sup>) that intellectual pleasures are more desirable and more valuable because they are of a higher quality is like saying that they are more valuable because they are more valuable.<sup>12</sup> We have learned nothing new. Mill's argument

<sup>10</sup> It is rather astounding that this is hardly ever noticed or remarked upon by modern critics. And even when it is, it does not seem to be considered a serious objection to Mill's argument. Guy Fletcher for instance admits that 'the notion of quality remains somewhat mysterious' (Guy Fletcher, 'Qualitative Hedonism and Malicious Pleasures', *Utilitas* 20.4 (2008), pp. 462–71, at 467), but nonetheless defends Mill's qualitative hedonism against Bradley and Moore as completely consistent.

<sup>11</sup> For a different view see Christoph Schmidt-Petri, 'Mill on Quality and Quantity', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53/ 210 (2003), pp. 102–4.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Donner claims that Mill assigns a 'consistent meaning' to the notion of quality, and that quality should not be taken to be synonymous with value. Rather, quality is

here is actually the philosophical equivalent of a sleight of hand. The reader is led to believe that Mill has given her an explanation, while in fact he has done no such thing. This vacuity is the first and main problem with Mill's conception of quality.

*Problem no. 2: the competent judge's preference*

The second problem is that it is virtually impossible to reconcile Mill's account of how the quality of a pleasure can be determined with our actual experience. Mill maintains that a pleasure A is of a higher quality than a pleasure B if those acquainted with both give a 'decided preference' to A. But what exactly is a *decided* preference? 'If one of the two', Mill continues to explain,

is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.<sup>13</sup>

So pleasure A is more valuable than pleasure B if A is being preferred to B *irrespective of quantity*. By 'prefer' I take Mill not to mean that the competent judge simply *declares* a certain kind of pleasure to be superior to another (which may easily be explained by the expert's 'feeling of moral obligation to prefer it'), but rather that they also *act* in accordance with their judgement, that is, actively pursue the pleasure they believe to be superior whenever that is possible. It would be odd to say of someone who is entirely free to choose between A and B, and chooses B, that she actually prefers A. So in order to show that I really do 'prefer' – *decidedly* prefer, that is – pleasure A to pleasure B, I would, if given the choice between the two, always and without much hesitation have to choose A.

Now let us pause for a moment and see how plausible this is. Let us take a clear low-quality pleasure like the kind of pleasure that people commonly derive from engaging in sexual activities, and a high-quality pleasure like the kind of pleasure that some people derive from going to the opera and attending a performance of, say, Mozart's *Magic*

'just another ordinary property' that *contributes* to value, just as quantity does. The term 'quality' has to be understood as 'that additional good-making characteristic of pleasures' (Donner, 'Mill's Utilitarianism', p. 263). However, Donner fails to explain what this property is, except that it is something that makes pleasures good (or better than others). We would want to know, though, *why* it makes pleasures good, or *what* exactly makes them good. In the absence of such a reason, Donner's explanation is just as helpful as the Doctor's explanation in Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire*, who, when asked why opium makes people sleep, replies that it possesses a *vis dormativa*, i.e. a sleep-making power.

<sup>13</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, p. 211.

*Flute* (which engages the ‘higher’ faculties of the intellect and the imagination). Since people only rarely are lucky enough to have sex while attending a public Mozart performance, in most cases they will have to choose between the two. If we take seriously what Mill said about our alleged decided preference for the so-called higher pleasures, then it seems that, when given the choice, we will always choose the opera. Yet this is obviously not true. Even if I happen to like the opera, and Mozart particularly, and am quite capable of deriving considerable pleasure from the experience, I might still, on occasion, prefer to have sex instead. How I decide on a given occasion clearly depends on the circumstances: on how long I haven’t been to the opera (and how long I haven’t had sex), whether I have already paid for the tickets, whether I will have another chance to see that particular performance (and another chance to have sex in the near future, or with that particular person), etc. So I don’t seem to have a clear preference for certain *kinds* of pleasure, and I suppose most people will, in their actual practice, be similarly undecided or changeable. If it were otherwise, then, given that intellectual pleasures are not hard to get hold of (there’s always a good book that we could read or re-read), we should expect that most people never have sex at all, which is clearly not the case. Last time I looked, it was still a popular pastime, even among academics. And even if there was someone who would, when given the choice, in most, or perhaps even in all, cases choose the opera over sex, it is rather unlikely that he would not, as Mill would have him do, resign this pleasure ‘for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of. I am quite sure that, for most people, the promise of unlimited sexual pleasure of the utmost humanly possible intensity beats the prospect of listening to Mozart (or reading philosophical articles on Mill) any time.

To salvage Mill’s account of ‘decided preference’, one may want to argue that Mill never thought we could determine the quality of a pleasure simply by looking at what people actually prefer to do in concrete situations. Rather than choosing, over and over again, between different pleasures, we in fact make a choice between different kinds of life, and that is where we show our preference, since those who have had some experience of a life that also engages their higher faculties are unlikely to want to exchange it for a life that is devoid of such pleasures. Mill himself suggests this interpretation when he goes on to say that it ‘is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the *manner of existence* which employs their higher faculties’.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, p. 211 (my italics).



However, although this may well be true (why else should I bother writing this article, and you reading it?), it doesn't show what it is supposed to show, namely that some pleasures are *more valuable*, in fact *infinitely* more valuable, than others. I may not want to live the life of an oyster, no matter how long and pleasant it is.<sup>15</sup> Yet I would not be very keen to live the life of a thinking machine either, that is a life rich in intellectual pleasures and pleasures of the imagination, but also utterly devoid of all others. If my fairy godmother came to me and offered me a life of never-ending sexual pleasures if I only agreed never to read another book in my life, no doubt I would decline the offer. But if she came back and offered me unlimited access to all books ever written, and enough time to read them, provided that I agree never again to enjoy sexual pleasures or any other bodily pleasures, I would almost certainly also decline. The point is that both kinds of pleasure are important to us and requisite to our happiness. From the fact that most of us would not want to be a happy oyster, nothing follows about the superiority of intellectual pleasures, as long as we are equally reluctant (as I, for one, am) to give up our human, embodied existence and become a brain-in-the-vat instead.

### III. TEMPTATION, INFIRMITY OF CHARACTER AND BAD HABITS

Now Mill is of course aware that most people most of the time do in fact *not* prefer the alleged higher pleasures, and do not even prefer with any consistency a manner of existence that is particularly devoted to them. Even those who are well acquainted with the higher pleasures often pursue the lower ones. Mill tries to explain this rather surprising fact by reference to what was traditionally known as the 'weakness of the will', which was already controversially debated by Plato and Aristotle. Mill, however, seems to be uncertain whether to side with the one or with the other. While Plato had his Socrates argue that nobody would do anything bad (or morally wrong) if he only knew it was bad (or morally wrong) and that therefore nobody did anything wrong knowingly and voluntarily,<sup>16</sup> Aristotle insisted that people who did wrong generally had a pretty good idea that it was wrong and thus clearly acted out of their own free will.<sup>17</sup>

Mill, blaming the general lack of commitment to what he thinks of as the higher manner of existence on temptation and infirmity of character, starts out as an Aristotelian when he claims that people's

<sup>15</sup> See Roger Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London, 1997), pp. 24–5.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Protagoras* 345d.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.3, 1145b 21; VII.11, 1152a 15.

actual preference for the lower pleasures is ‘quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher’ and that they choose a lower good ‘though they know it to be less valuable’.<sup>18</sup> In other words, even when people in fact prefer a lower pleasure to a higher one, they still *know* which one is higher and which lower, and then they also know, even if they don’t actually pursue the higher one, that they actually *should* pursue it. However, if that is true, then it is a mystery why people do in fact not pursue the pleasure that they *know* is more valuable (to them).

Probably for this reason Mill contradicts himself almost immediately and adopts a more Platonic stance when he confesses not to believe that those who lose ‘their youthful enthusiasm for everything noble’ ‘*voluntarily* choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher’.<sup>19</sup> Rather, they have become *incapable* of enjoying the higher pleasures, and only then do they cease pursuing them entirely:

Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise.<sup>20</sup>

Yet having become incapable of enjoying a higher pleasure surely implies no longer regarding it as a pleasure. If I can’t enjoy reading Mill any more, then, for me, reading Mill no longer seems to be a pleasure at all. I may still feel that I *should* be reading Mill (and may *wish* that I’d enjoy reading him), but surely I can no longer believe that the *pleasure* of reading Mill is intrinsically, considered only as a pleasure, of a higher quality than the pleasure of, say, drinking beer in front of the television – since I am no longer able to see it as a pleasure in the first place. Therefore it is rather unlikely that someone in whom the ‘tender plant’ of the nobler feelings has died will still enjoy a ‘full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher’ pleasures. But be that as it may, the fact remains that, knowingly or unknowingly, many people actually do prefer the lower pleasures.

*Problem no. 3: telling competent from incompetent judges*

The purpose of the above-sketched argument from infirmity of character was to allow Mill to make a case for discounting such weak-willed people and to persuade the reader that, although many may be

<sup>18</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, p. 212.

<sup>19</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, pp. 212–13 (my italics).

<sup>20</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, p. 213.

acquainted with both the lower and the higher pleasures, not all of them are really competent judges at all.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps they once were, but they are not anymore. A competent judge is someone who 'has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures', and Mill shows himself convinced that no such judge would ever 'knowingly and calmly' prefer the lower.<sup>22</sup>

So where does that leave us? Let me recapitulate. We are still trying to give a clear meaning to the notion of a quantity-independent, value-conferring *quality* of pleasures, which Mill introduced in response to the charge that utilitarianism was a philosophy 'worthy only of swine'. Instead of telling us directly what makes one pleasure more valuable than another (and thus worthy of being pursued by humans), independent of quantity, Mill referred us to the 'competent judges', whose preference is indicative of higher-quality pleasures. So what is *meant* by a 'higher-quality' pleasure is the kind of pleasure that a competent judge would prefer. A competent judge appeared to be someone who was acquainted with both the lower-quality and the higher-quality pleasures. Yet many people who seem to meet this criterion do in fact prefer pleasures that Mill considers to be of a lower quality. This poses an obvious problem to the theory. When all that 'higher-quality pleasure' means is that it is such that people with enough experience tend to prefer it, yet those who appear to have that experience do in fact *not* prefer what Mill believes to be the higher pleasures, then it seems that we don't really know at all what 'higher quality' means. To solve the problem, Mill claims that people who prefer the lower pleasures, though they are indeed acquainted with the higher ones, have been corrupted and can therefore be discounted. Competent judges are in fact only those who are still capable of appreciating the higher pleasures. But how do we recognize these competent judges? How can we tell competent and incompetent judges apart? The only answer that can be taken from what Mill actually says is that if they actually prefer the higher pleasures to the lower (by actively pursuing them), then they are obviously still capable of appreciating them and should hence count as competent judges.

The problem with this argument (and this is the third problem with Mill's qualitative hedonism that we discuss) is of course that it is

<sup>21</sup> There is an elitist tendency in Mill to find only 'cultivated' people worth considering. Thus, in his study *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, in which he clearly sympathizes with Comte's religion of humanity, he recommends that, so that 'the ennobling power of this grand conception may have its full efficacy, we . . . regard the Grand Être, Humanity, or Mankind, as composed, in the past, solely of those who, in every age and variety of position, have played their part worthily in life. . . . The unworthy members of it are best dismissed from our habitual thoughts' (CW 10, p. 334).

<sup>22</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, p. 213.

blatantly circular. We are told that in order to find out what kinds of pleasure are most valuable we need to ask competent judges which *they* prefer, and when we ask who *is* a competent judge we are told that competent judges are those, and only those, who prefer the higher kinds of pleasure. The whole argument from infirmity of character already presupposes a knowledge of which pleasures are higher and which lower, since the very reason why someone is declared to suffer from infirmity of character is that she prefers those pleasures that Mill considers of a low quality. The circular structure of the argument makes it impossible to determine the different qualities of pleasure by following Mill's suggestion.

This is already bad enough. However, it gets even worse. Let us assume that somehow we have figured out who is a competent judge and who is not, and we ask them 'which is the best worth having of two pleasures'. Then, according to Mill, 'the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, *or, if they differ, that of the majority among them*, must be admitted as final.'<sup>23</sup> Now, this is again a very strange claim. Since we have already eliminated all those whose judgement is, for some reason or other, distorted and unreliable, then one should think that those who are left must all be equally competent to give us a definite answer to the question of which kinds of pleasure are more valuable, and which less. How then should it be possible that a minority of those competent judges may actually *disagree* with the majority? How should it be possible that even one of those judges disagrees with the rest? And if there can be, inexplicably, competent judges who disagree and actually prefer what Mill sees as a lower pleasure to what he sees as a higher pleasure, then there does not seem to be a good reason why these dissenting judges should not be the majority after all. Yet if that is a real possibility, and Mill does not give us any reason at all to think that it is not, then we cannot even rely on competent judges to tell us which kinds of pleasure are of a higher, and which of a lower, quality.

The conclusion is that Mill's whole argument fails miserably. We still have no idea whatsoever what the alleged difference in quality between an intellectual pleasure and a bodily pleasure actually consists in, and we don't even have a reliable way of distinguishing the alleged 'higher' from the alleged 'lower' pleasures. The claim that those who are acquainted with both kinds of pleasure will 'prefer' the intellectual to the bodily is clearly counterfactual. It does not state how things actually are (what people do, feel or think), but instead how (Mill thinks that)

<sup>23</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, 213 (my italics).

things *ought to be*, i.e. what pleasures people ought to pursue, or what they ought to find pleasure in.

#### IV. A MORE PLEASANT LIFE?

Several critics have tried to fill the explanatory gap left by Mill's failure to lend content to the notion of a quantity-independent 'quality' of pleasures that is supposed to lift some kinds of pleasure above others. Because it seems to preserve the consistency of Mill's professed hedonism, the most popular way of doing this is by declaring that a life devoted to the pursuit of the higher pleasures is simply *more pleasant* than a life that lacks them and is dominated by the lower pleasures instead.

Thus Rex Martin has argued that according to Mill 'the kinds of pleasant life differ in their degree of being pleasant',<sup>24</sup> and in nothing else. Even though the individual pleasures themselves do not necessarily differ in terms of pleasantness, the respective *lives* do. When Mill claims that being Socrates dissatisfied is still better than being a satisfied fool, thereby getting dangerously close to discarding the hedonistic theory of life that utilitarians officially adhere to, Martin interprets Mill as implying that 'Socrates is pleased in a different and more pleasant way than is the fool'.<sup>25</sup> Henry West agrees with Martin's reading of Mill, but argues that if a life involving the use of the higher cognitive capacities is more pleasant than one in which they are not used, then this can only be because 'in some or most cases mental pleasures *per se* are more pleasant than bodily ones'.<sup>26</sup> There are, in West's view, some experiences that, without being more intense, just 'feel better' than others.<sup>27</sup>

Jonathan Riley develops this view further when he declares Mill to be a consistent hedonist who believed that higher-quality pleasures were '*infinitely* more pleasant'<sup>28</sup> than lower-quality pleasures: 'Fewer units of a higher-quality pleasure still amount to more pleasure than any finite number of units of lower-quality pleasure because units of the higher pleasure are intrinsically or infinitely greater than units of

<sup>24</sup> Rex Martin, 'A Defence of Mill's Qualitative Hedonism', *Philosophy* 47 (1972), pp. 140–51, at 146.

<sup>25</sup> Martin, 'A Defence of Mill's Qualitative Hedonism', p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> Henry R. West, 'Mill's Qualitative Hedonism', *Philosophy* 51 (1976), pp. 97–101, at 99.

<sup>27</sup> West, 'Mill's Qualitative Hedonism', p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Riley, 'Millian Qualitative Superiorities and Utilitarianism, Part I', *Utilitas* 20.3 (2008), pp. 257–78, at 278.

the lower.<sup>29</sup> Riley argues that it is the infinite distance between two kinds of pleasure that saves Mill from inconsistency:

It is clear that the only way to construct a coherent pluralistic hedonism along Mill's lines is to define qualitative superiority as infinite superiority: a pleasant feeling is superior in quality to another if and only if the higher pleasure is *infinitely* superior in value to the lower pleasure as pleasure.<sup>30</sup>

There are several passages in Mill's writings that may be seen to support such attempts to reconcile the hedonistic theory of life with what Mill says about the quality of pleasures. He often points out that without access to the higher pleasures – which requires the uninhibited cultivation of our cognitive, aesthetic, and moral capacities – we cannot be truly happy. In *Utilitarianism*, for instance, he remarks that next

to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory, is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind . . . 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.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, in his early *Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, Mill stresses the importance of a lively interest in the welfare of our fellow beings for the attainment of personal happiness:

There are, and have been, multitudes, in whom the motive of conscience or moral obligation has been thus paramount. There is nothing in the constitution of human nature to forbid its being so in all mankind. Until it is so, the race will never enjoy one-tenth part of the happiness which our nature is susceptible of.

Without social interests, without a moral state of mind our enjoyment of life can be but poor and scanty.<sup>32</sup>

However, this surplus value of the higher-quality pleasures can easily be explained in terms of the elements of Bentham's felicific calculus, that is, as a purely *quantitative* advantage. Lower-quality pleasures tend to be intense, but are also rather short-lived, often followed by states of displeasure, and don't give rise to other pleasures so much. In other words, they are deficient with respect to duration, fecundity and purity. So in order to account for *this* difference in kinds of pleasure, there is no need at all to introduce quality as something other than (and superior to) quantity.<sup>33</sup> Mill himself occasionally

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Riley, 'Interpreting Mill's Qualitative Hedonism', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003), pp. 410–18, at 416.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Riley, 'Millian Qualitative Superiorities and Utilitarianism, Part II', *Utilitas* 21.2 (2009), pp. 127–43, at 128.

<sup>31</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, pp. 215–16.

<sup>32</sup> *Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, CW 10, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, pp. 118–19 [1927 in n. 1], who puts this point rather nicely: "The 'higher pleasure' is here the pleasure which contains in itself most degrees

distinguishes quite clearly between human *happiness*, which requires a rich variety of pleasures including the so-called 'higher' ones, and human *nobility*, which despite requiring the same variety, is not identical with happiness:

Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities of pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral agencies, that unless there is corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they *neither* obtain their fair share of happiness, *nor* grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable.<sup>34</sup>

The wording suggests that although a person's 'mental, moral, and aesthetic stature' may well *contribute* to her happiness, it cannot be understood *as* that contribution. Happiness is one thing, and nobility or 'mental, moral and aesthetic stature' quite another, but for Mill equally important.

The proposal that we understand Mill's notion of a higher-quality pleasure as meaning simply a particularly pleasant kind of pleasure is implausible for several reasons. First of all, Mill never *says* anywhere that a higher-quality pleasure is *more pleasant* than a lower-quality pleasure. If he had meant that, he could have said so, but he didn't. Why not?

Second, the claim that a certain kind of pleasure is more pleasant despite not being more intense or more lasting is both incomprehensible and contrary to the evidence provided by our experience. Does anyone really believe that reading Mill is in some way *more pleasant* than having a sexual orgasm? In what way exactly? It 'feels better', claims West, but does it really? We may occasionally prefer reading Mill to having an orgasm for all sorts of reasons, but none of them has got anything to do with the reading being more pleasant than the orgasm. This is simply an absurd distortion of the facts of experience, and the claim does not get any clearer, or more persuasive, if we qualify it by adding, as Riley does, that the higher-quality pleasure is not just more pleasant, but rather 'infinitely more pleasant', than the lower-quality pleasure. While we have at least some idea of what it means for one activity or experience to be more pleasant than another, I very

of pleasure, or which contributes on the whole to the existence of a larger number of degrees of pleasure. Here the principle of the greatest amount of pleasure is adhered to; that is the top, and what approaches to it or contributes to it is nearer the top. But since the moral "higher" is here, as we see, the more pleasurable or the means to the more pleasurable, we come in the end to the amount, the quantity of pleasure without distinction of kind or quality; and having already seen that such an end is not a moral end, we get nothing from the phrases "higher" and "lower" unless it be confusion.'

<sup>34</sup> *On Liberty*, CW 18, p. 270 (my italics).

much doubt that we have a clear understanding of what it means for a pleasure to be ‘infinitely’ more pleasant than another.<sup>35</sup>

At any rate, reading Mill seems to be neither more pleasant, nor infinitely more pleasant, than having a sexual orgasm, by any known standard of pleasantness. Yet no doubt Mill would think of sexual pleasure as a lower-quality pleasure, and of studying philosophy as a higher-quality pleasure, from which it follows that he cannot have meant what sympathetic critics like Riley claim he did.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, if all that Mill meant by higher quality is that a particular kind of pleasure was more pleasant than another, then he would not have solved the problem that made him introduce the notion of quality in the first place, namely that utilitarianism appears to undermine the distinction between animals and humans in terms of the value of their lives, and the deeply entrenched idea that it is *per se* better to be a human than a swine, and *not* simply because the life of a human is potentially more pleasurable than the life of a swine, but because it is *nobler*. A more pleasant kind of pleasure, even an infinitely more pleasant one, would not in itself be more *worthy* of being desired and pursued than a less pleasant one. Humans would still be like swine in the sense that they both desire as much pleasure as their nature is capable of, *and nothing else*.

## V. MILL’S THEORY OF HUMAN LIFE

The first question in regard to any man of speculation is, what is his theory of human life? In the minds of many philosophers, whatever theory they have of this sort is latent, and it would be a revelation to themselves to have it pointed out to them in their writings as others can see it, unconsciously moulding everything to its own likeness.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Riley, ‘Millian Qualitative Superiorities and Utilitarianism, Part II’, p. 129, confuses the issue even further when he claims that the higher pleasures are infinitely more pleasant by being infinitely more *intense*: ‘In effect, Mill’s hedonistic innovation is to enlarge the meaning of “intensity” so that it covers not only the finite superiority of a larger quantity over a smaller quantity of pleasure of the same kind but also the infinite superiority of a higher quality of pleasure over a lower. A higher pleasure is infinitely more intense than a lower pleasure, keeping in mind that the feeling of “infinitely more intense” (that is, qualitative superiority) may not actually feel (and is not required to feel) anything like the feeling of “finitely more intense” (that is quantitative superiority).’ In other words, an infinitely more intense pleasure doesn’t feel more intense at all. In what sense then is it more intense? Apparently in the sense of being more valuable. That would mean, though, that we cannot explain the alleged greater value of the pleasure in terms of its greater intensity. It remains unexplained and cannot be accounted for by the utilitarian theory that Mill defends.

<sup>36</sup> *Bentham*, CW 10, p. 94.



Mill had Bentham in mind when he wrote this, but it is equally true of himself. In his heart Mill was no hedonist, although he publicly embraced hedonism and never rejected it openly or even knowingly. He certainly tried hard to be one, but couldn't quite bring himself to embrace it unreservedly. *Utilitarianism* was his attempt to persuade not only his readers, but also himself, that ethical hedonism is the correct theory of life. But he never really believed that it was. He certainly defended, as David O. Brink has pointed out, 'a conception of human happiness whose dominant component consists in the exercise of one's rational capacities',<sup>37</sup> whereby, for Mill, the activity has a value in itself, independent of the pleasure that can be derived from it. Mill clearly believed that there were higher and lower ways of existing. He claimed that although a human is 'capable probably of more acute suffering, and is certainly accessible to it at more points', 'he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence.'<sup>38</sup> That is why Socrates, even in his darkest days, when the exercise of his intellectual abilities led him to the brink of an untimely death, could not really wish that he had been born a fool. That is why no human, no matter how unhappy he is, can ever really wish to be a swine. Not because even the unhappiest human was still happier than the happiest pig (let alone 'infinitely' more happy), but because ultimately there are things in life that matter more to us than happiness or pleasurable experiences. If we have to live the life of a pig in order to have such experiences, then the price is simply too high.

Humans, Mill believed, were not only capable of but also meant for a higher form of life. He believed that *dignity* was of the utmost importance, a feeling of self-worth that is not only constitutive of our well-being, but *justified* by what we do and what we are. Mill criticized Bentham for referring to 'self-respect' not even once in all his works, and for talking about the 'springs of action' without ever mentioning the 'sense of honour, and personal dignity – that feeling of personal exaltation and degradation which acts independently of other people's opinion, or even in defiance of it'.<sup>39</sup> This 'sense of dignity' is the reason why we (or many of us) do not want to live like pigs, why we want to exercise our mental and not merely our physical faculties. No doubt, as Mill points out, this sense of dignity forms an essential part of our happiness, but only 'in those in whom it is strong'.<sup>40</sup> This admits of the possibility that those in whom the sense of dignity is *not* strong, or

<sup>37</sup> David O. Brink, 'Mill's Deliberative Utilitarianism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21.1 (1992), pp. 67–103, at 68.

<sup>38</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW, p. 212.

<sup>39</sup> *Bentham*, CW 10, pp. 95–6.

<sup>40</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW 10, p. 212.

who lack it entirely, may thoroughly enjoy living the life of a pig, for dignity is not an essential part of *their* happiness. Nonetheless they may rightly be pitied for not living the life of a human, not because it is less pleasurable, but because it is a 'low grade of existence'.

Mill clearly advocates a certain ideal of human nature. He sees humans not primarily as what they are, but rather as what they might become. He has only praise for the 'Greek ideal of self-development'<sup>41</sup> and the 'great duty' of self-culture,<sup>42</sup> and claims that 'the duty of man is the same in respect to his own nature as in respect to the nature of all other things, namely not to follow but to amend it.'<sup>43</sup> Human beings have a task to fulfil, and that task is not primarily the maximization of happiness. Instead they must bring themselves 'nearer to the best thing they can be',<sup>44</sup> 'nearer to the ideal perfection of human nature'.<sup>45</sup>

Mill certainly believes that self-improvement will increase our happiness (that is, both our own personal happiness and the happiness of others with whom we share our lives), but that is not the only reason why we should strive for it. We will be happier, but also more *worthy* of being happy because the activities and experiences that make up our happiness will be, in themselves, more worthy of being pursued. Mill sees 'man himself' as 'struggling upwards against immense natural difficulties, into civilization, and making to himself a second nature, far better and more unselfish than he was created with'.<sup>46</sup> He even encourages us to find our ideal or standard of excellence in Jesus Christ, who can show us how to reach, not more pleasure, but 'truth and virtue'.<sup>47</sup> He prefaces *On Liberty* with a quote by Wilhelm von Humboldt: 'The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.'<sup>48</sup> The whole essay on liberty is an argument for the cultivation of individuality, which Mill is convinced is needed to make sure that 'human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation', and the race (i.e. the species) to which the individual

<sup>41</sup> *On Liberty*, CW 18, p. 266.

<sup>42</sup> *Bentham*, CW 10, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> *Nature*, CW 10, p. 397.

<sup>44</sup> *On Liberty*, CW 18, p. 267.

<sup>45</sup> *On Liberty*, CW 18, p. 278.

<sup>46</sup> *Theism*, CW 10, p. 459.

<sup>47</sup> *Theism*, CW 10, p. 488. Although decidedly hostile and frequently unjust in her reading of Mill, Linda C. Raeder has a point when she insists that the 'aim of Benthamite utilitarianism, certainly in the hands of the morally impassioned Mills, was not pleasure or happiness but virtue' (*John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia and London, 2002), p. 15).

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in *On Liberty*, CW 18, p. 215.

belongs 'infinitely better worth belonging to'.<sup>49</sup> Alan Ryan hit the mark when, forty years ago, he declared that 'Mill's concern with self-development and moral progress is a strand in his philosophy to which almost everything else is subordinate' and that his goals transcend utilitarian principles 'and can only be described as the freely pursued life of personal nobility'.<sup>50</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

Those who accused utilitarianism of being a 'philosophy worthy only of swine' thought that utilitarians were unable to account for the common intuition that it is better to be a human than an animal, and better to be an intelligent, morally responsible being than a vicious fool. They were wrong. As Plato did before them, utilitarians can always argue that both stupidity and injustice, or a lack of concern for the welfare of one's fellow-beings, generally prevent people from being truly happy. An intellectual and moral life is simply more pleasant than one that is devoted largely to the satisfaction of physical desires. This is of course an empirical claim that may or may not be true. If it is not (and if we can clearly demonstrate that it is not, which might prove impossible), then utilitarians can still insist that the most pleasant life is the best life, but they can no longer, with Mill, claim that an intellectual and moral life is *better* than a life lived in the pursuit of, say, 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll'. However, if the empirical claim is true, then the utilitarian is entirely justified in declaring a life devoted to the 'higher' pleasures far better than a life devoted to the 'lower' ones. For the purpose of this article, however, what is important is that, as long as the contrary has not been proved, a utilitarian can accept and defend the claim that it is better to be a human than an animal without having to compromise her hedonistic assumptions. And Mill did just that.

However, what a utilitarian *cannot* do is show that the life of a human being is better than the life of an animal in the sense of being *nobler* or *more dignified*. Most people do not only feel that the life of a human is, on average or potentially, more pleasurable than the life of an animal, but also, or even more so, that humans are, in some unspecified way, better off than animals. This is the reason why many people may not want to swap their life for that of a swine even when they are very unhappy and the life of the swine, in comparison, much happier. People do indeed tend to believe that it is better to be Socrates unsatisfied than a pig satisfied. Mill shared this intuition, the deeply ingrained

<sup>49</sup> *On Liberty*, CW 18, p. 266.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (London, 1970), p. 255.

belief in the inherent superiority of the human mode of existence, and he tried to account for it by declaring some kinds of pleasure to be of a higher quality, and hence intrinsically more *worthy* of being desired, than others. Unfortunately for him, and for utilitarianism, his attempt failed. Either utilitarianism and the hedonistic theory of life on which it is based are true, in which case ultimately it doesn't matter what we are (a human or a pig, an intellectual or a blockhead) and what we do (reading philosophy or having sex) as long as we are happy (and we don't compromise the happiness of others),<sup>51</sup> or, happy or not, it *does* matter what we are and do (i.e. what *kinds* of pleasure we pursue, without taking the *degree* of pleasantness into account), in which case utilitarianism cannot be true. Mill tried to achieve the impossible: to embrace both hedonism and the belief that humans are very special and essentially very different from swine.

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<sup>51</sup> By this I of course do *not* mean that, for the utilitarian, it doesn't matter at all what we do. Obviously, an action that is conducive to general happiness (including the happiness of animals) is better than an action that is not, and the more conducive it is, the better it is from a utilitarian point of view. However, whether I contribute to the general happiness by producing and distributing exciting video action games or by creating great works of art should not matter to the utilitarian *as long as the amount of happiness produced is the same*.