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What are Millian Qualitative Superiorities?

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ABSTRACT: In an article published in *Prolegomena* 2006, Christoph Schmidt-Petri has defended his interpretation and attacked mine of Mill's idea that higher kinds of pleasure are superior in quality to lower kinds, regardless of quantity. Millian qualitative superiorities as I understand them are infinite superiorities. In this paper, I clarify my interpretation and show how Schmidt-Petri has misrepresented it and ignored the obvious textual support for it. As a result, he fails to understand how genuine Millian qualitative superiorities determine the novel structure of Mill's pluralistic utilitarianism, in which a social code of justice that distributes equal rights and duties takes absolute priority over competing considerations. Schmidt-Petri's own interpretation is a non-starter, because it does not even recognize that Mill is talking about different kinds of pleasant feelings, such that the higher kinds are intrinsically more valuable than the lower. I conclude by outlining why my interpretation is free of any metaphysical commitment to the "essence" of pleasure.

KEYWORDS: Essence, hedonism, higher and lower pleasure, infinite superiority, justice, lexical hierarchy, Mill, security, utilitarianism.

1. Introduction

In a recent article[1] Christoph Schmidt-Petri has attacked my interpretation of John Stuart Mill's doctrine that some pleasures, or kinds of pleasures, are superior in quality to others irrespective of quantity. His attack emerges in the course of his clarification of his own interpretation and his defense of it against my objections published elsewhere.[2] I am flattered

[1] Schmidt-Petri (2006).

[2] Riley (2003), commenting critically on Schmidt-Petri (2003). I indicated at that time that certain aspects of his interpretation remained ambiguous, in particular, his understanding of "pleasure".

that he has seen fit to discuss critically my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities, especially because he introduces his discussion with the rather shocking claim that he can "show" that the textual evidence for my reading is "charitably speaking, very weak", based on his "comprehensive" assessment of Mill's writings (2003, p. 165). But I wish that he had studied Mill's texts with more care and shown some understanding of my interpretation, rather than seriously misrepresenting it. Perhaps he might then have come to a different conclusion about who is in need of some charity.

This paper is a response to Schmidt-Petri's attack, and a further clarification of my view that Millian qualitative superiorities are infinite superiorities. I identify the point at which Schmidt-Petri seriously distorts my view, and offer some speculations about the sources of his misunderstanding. I also illustrate my interpretation by providing some textual evidence for my claim that, for Mill, the kind of pleasant feeling (including freedom from suffering) associated with the moral sentiment of justice is infinitely superior to any competing kinds. I conclude by re-examining Schmidt-Petri's interpretation of qualitative superiorities, which he has now clarified. I argue that his conventional idea of "quality" is not Mill's, that the conventional idea is properly an idea of "quantity", and that, if the conventional idea were all that Mill had in mind, there would never have been any reason for traditional hedonists and their critics alike to have scorned his qualitative hedonism as an incoherent doctrine. Henry Sidgwick, G.E. Moore and all those in their train would simply have failed to recognize that Mill was defending a purely quantitative hedonism like Jeremy Bentham's all along, one in which the idea of qualitative superiority is completely redundant and only breeds confusion.

2. Qualitative Superiorities as Infinite Superiorities

Mill tells us in *Utilitarianism* II 5–8 what he means by difference of quality in pleasures. He first indicates that he does *not* mean difference of quantity or intensity: difference of quality is a difference that "makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, *except* [that is, independently of] its being greater in amount" (X, p. 211, my emphasis). In other words, a qualitatively superior pleasure is more valuable than an inferior one "apart from the question of intensity" (p. 213). Mill then spells out that, for a hedonist, qualitative superiority means that the higher pleasure is *intrinsically* more pleasant than the lower pleasure, so that any amount of the higher, however small, is more valuable than any amount of the lower, however large. Thus, he speaks of "the *intrinsic* superiority of the higher" pleasure (p. 212, my emphasis). Qualitative superiority in this

sense is confirmed in the case of any two pleasant feelings, if most people who are competently acquainted with both refuse to give up the one feeling for any amount of the other:

> If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it […] 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 (p. 211, my emphasis).

This test of qualitative superiority – the preferences of most if not all people who are competently acquainted with the relevant pleasures – should not be conflated with the abstract idea of qualitative superiority or intrinsic superiority *per se*.

My claim is that Millian qualitative superiorities are properly interpreted as infinite superiorities: 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. The higher pleasure's infinite superiority means that it is more valuable in terms of pleasure than any finite amount of the lower pleasure. Its superiority over the lower pleasure is unlimited, in other words, because it continues to be more valuable no matter how large the finite mass of lower pleasure is assumed to become.[3] This interpretation seems to be the only way to make sense of Mill's doctrine that a qualitatively superior pleasure is intrinsically more valuable than an inferior one irrespective of quantity. The higher pleasure is intrinsically more valuable, that is, more valuable in virtue of its nature than the lower pleasure. As a result, the respective finite amounts of these different kinds of pleasures are of no account, or of such small account that they may be ignored, in a hedonistic assessment of their relative values. The higher kind of pleasant feeling takes absolute priority over the lower in cases of conflict.

More formally, my interpretation holds that for any finite set of feasible outcomes X, there are plural kinds of pleasant feelings u^A, u^B, … u^K defined over X such that any higher kind is infinitely more pleasant than any lower kind, irrespective of quantity. Even a bit of a higher pleasure u^A is intrinsically more valuable than any quantity of a lower pleasure

[3] It should be emphasized that the higher pleasure cannot properly be said to be equal in value to an actual infinite quantity of the lower pleasure. Infinity is not a real number, magnitude or quantity. Human beings are incapable of experiencing an actual infinity of pleasure of any kind. As Mill (following Aristotle and many others) recognizes, we cannot even conceive of what an actual completed infinity would look like: "infinity" is merely a term that denotes an unlimited magnitude or an endless process of "coming into being".

u^B which human nature is capable of experiencing, no matter how large the finite mass of u^B is assumed to become. There is never any need to balance the positive value contribution of the higher pleasure against the contribution of the lower to overall pleasure: any finite amount of u^A, no matter how small, always outweighs any finite amount of u^B, no matter how large.

Millian qualitative superiorities can be expressed by saying that a unit of the higher pleasure is infinitely larger than a unit of the lower pleasure in terms of pleasure. The infinite difference in degree is translated into a qualitative difference, or difference in kind.[4] This is consistent with the standard hedonistic idea of quantitative superiorities confined to any given kind of pleasant feeling. A unit of any pleasure is still counted as equal in intrinsic value to any other unit of pleasure of the same kind. There are still the usual finite differences of degree with respect to pleasant feelings that do not differ in quality. Qualitative superiority thus works in harmony with quantitative superiority.

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). Thus, even a single unit of the higher pleasure is larger than any finite mass, no matter how large, of the lower pleasure. At the same time, it remains valid to say that a finite mass of pleasure is finitely more intense than a smaller finite mass of pleasure of the same type. Intensity can vary to a finite degree for any given kind or quality of pleasant feeling.

Millian qualitative superiorities give rise to a lexical ordering of different kinds of pleasures defined over X. In a lexical ordering, a particular feature, or type of feature, of the feasible outcomes has absolute priority over other features for determining the ordering. A dictionary serves as the model: the letter "a" at the start of a word puts the word ahead of all words that begin with other letters, no matter how many other letters compose the words. Under hedonism, where the pleasure associated with them is the sole feature of the outcomes which has intrinsic value, a lexical order-

[4] Again, to say that a unit of higher pleasure is infinitely larger is to say that a unit of the higher remains larger and thus more valuable than any finite mass of the lower, no matter how many units of lower pleasure are combined to make the finite mass. This does not imply that a unit of the higher is equal in value to an actual infinity of units of the lower. Experience presents us with no example of an actual completed infinity.

ing arises if there are higher pleasures which have absolute priority over lower pleasures for determining the ordering. This is the case in Millian pluralistic hedonism, where the infinite superiority of a higher pleasure implies that it has absolute priority over lower pleasures. The higher kind's infinite superiority over lower kinds produces discontinuities of intrinsic value: no finite amount of lower pleasure, however large, is equal in value to any amount of higher pleasure. As is well known, such discontinuities are characteristic of lexical orderings.

Strictly speaking, the lexical ordering of the different qualities of pleasures within pluralistic hedonism is a lexical meta-ranking, or ranking of rankings. The lexical ranking is a qualitative ranking of plural kinds of quantitative rankings, one for each kind of pleasant feeling expected from the feasible outcomes in X. Each kind of quantitative ranking is a ranking of the outcomes in terms of quantities or intensities of the relevant kind of pleasure or preference satisfaction. Each is defined over X – more specifically, some feature, or type of feature, of the outcomes which is the source or object of the relevant kind of pleasant feeling or enjoyment. The different kinds of quantitative rankings are arranged into a hierarchy, with the highest kind sitting at the top of the hierarchy, followed next by the second-highest kind, and so forth, down to the lowest kind sitting at the bottom position. The ultimate goal of the rational agent is to achieve an outcome that maximizes his happiness or satisfaction both in point of quantity and quality.

Lexical ranking must not be conflated with a simple ordinal preference ranking.[5] A lexical ordering is a very special ranking because it captures the discontinuities of value produced by the infinite superiorities of higher pleasures over lower. In contrast, a simple ordinal ranking of pleasures defined over X is a purely quantitative measure that does not capture the relevant discontinuities. Outcomes ranked higher by a simple ordinal ranking are judged merely to bring some larger finite amount of pleasure or satisfaction than outcomes ranked lower down in the ordering. Since the ordering can be represented by a continuous real-valued utility function, there is an implicit assumption that the pleasures associated with the outcomes being ranked differ only to some finite degree. Even if that assumption proved false, it would not matter for the purposes of the simple ordering: the nature of the alternatives is ignored. Thus, even if higher and lower pleasures in Mill's sense were expected from the outcomes being

[5] In his excellent discussion of pluralistic or qualitative hedonism, Rem Edwards (1979, 68–72, 111–119) suggests that Millian qualitative superiorities might be captured by a simple ordinal ranking of the different kinds or qualities of pleasant feelings. Like Edwards, Fred Wilson (1990, 220–223, 253, 275–293) also interprets Mill as groping for an ordinal utility scale that orders different qualities of utility from higher to lower without trying to quantify how much a higher quality differs from a lower.

ranked, a simple ordinal preference ranking would not register the infinite superiorities involved.

I have discussed my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities as infinite superiorities at some length because Schmidt-Petri evidently misunderstands it.[6] For some reason, he seriously misleads the reader into thinking that I endorse his view that "if some pleasure will be chosen over another available in [finitely] larger quantities, then we are justified in saying that the pleasure so chosen is of higher quality than the other" (2006, p. 166). But I certainly reject that view as incoherent for a hedonist to adopt, given that we are talking about pleasant feelings or satisfactions that are not otherwise different in kind; a rational hedonist cannot consistently choose a smaller finite quantity of pleasant feeling if a larger quantity of the same kind of feeling is available at some feasible outcome.[7]

What accounts for Schmidt-Petri's misunderstanding? One possibility, I guess, is that he treats infinity as a real number, so that higher pleasure might be considered equal in value to an actual infinity of lower pleasure. Perhaps he is alluding to this treatment of infinity when he suggests that I endorse his view, "niceties aside" (2006, p. 168). In that case, a rational agent might choose to give up some finite amount of higher pleasure for an actual infinite amount of lower pleasure. But that usage of "infinity" is a fiction of transcendental idealism insofar as it refers to something – a completed infinity – with which experience presents us no example. Mill uses "infinity" to mean magnitude or space without limit, connoting a never-ending and thus ever-incomplete series of steps that might converge on some limit, but never actually reaches it. For him, as for Aristotle, "infinity" is not a completed magnitude or finite quantity.[8]

Another possible source of misunderstanding lies in Schmidt-Petri's failure to distinguish between, on the one hand, different kinds of pleasant feelings which have different qualities or intrinsic values apart from

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[6] For a more detailed discussion of my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities, see Riley (2008a).

[7] Schmidt-Petri labels his view as PME and claims that, "niceties aside", I adopt it (2006, pp. 166, 168). Not only do I reject PME, but I would also modify his condition PSV to PSV* as follows: If *and only if* some pleasure is of higher quality, then it ought to be chosen over a pleasure of lower quality regardless of their respective quantities. As I understand it, the so-called "standard view" does *not* maintain that if a pleasure is not of higher quality, then it ought to be chosen over another pleasure regardless of their respective quantities. Indeed, it cannot do so consistently with hedonism: larger finite amounts of pleasant feeling must be chosen in preference to smaller amounts of the same kind of feeling, whatever the sources or objects of the feeling.

[8] See notes 3 & 4 above. For an indication of Mill's idea of "infinity", see Mill, "Editorial Notes" to the second edition of his father James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, XXXI, pp. 202–203; and Mill, "Bain's Psychology", XI, pp. 346–347.

quantity and, on the other hand, different sources or objects of a single kind of pleasant feeling. But I shall for the moment postpone discussion of this point.

Whatever accounts for his misunderstanding, Schmidt-Petri seems unusually confident that there is no textual evidence for my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities. But, from my perspective, he simply refuses to accept the obvious meaning of *Utilitarianism* II 5, and apparently shuts his eyes whenever he comes across other passages from Mill's writings that provide support for my view. It is also worth remarking that he offers no textual support for his own view that, for Mill, pleasant feelings of higher quality may reasonably be sacrificed for pleasures of lower quality. Even the contested passage in *Utilitarianism* II 5 never so much as hints that such sacrifices ought to be chosen at times by rational agents. Before investigating further why Schmidt-Petri apparently thinks he can ignore this objection, however, I shall provide some additional textual evidence for my interpretation.

3. Justice as Higher Pleasure

I have already pointed out that Mill is explicit about the "intrinsic superiority of the higher" pleasures, such that these pleasures are in virtue of their nature always more valuable than inferior pleasures, irrespective of quantity. He also tells us that "the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments" have "a much higher value as pleasures than […] those of mere sensation" (X, p. 211). In particular, he suggests in *Utilitarianism* V that the kind of pleasant feeling (including freedom from suffering) associated with the moral sentiment of justice, as he understands it, is higher in quality than any competing kinds of pleasures.[9]

This higher pleasure of justice, he explains, is an enjoyable feeling of "security" that can only be fully experienced under an effective and enduring social code that impartially distributes equal rights and correlative duties to all (p. 251). The rights which are distributed and enforced by society are the source of the individual's security:

> When we call anything a person's right, we mean that he has a valid claim on society to *protect* him in the possession of it, either by the force of law, or by that of education and opinion. If he has what we consider a sufficient claim, on whatever account, to have something guaranteed to him by society, we say that he has a right to it. (p. 250, my emphasis)

[9] For a more complete discussion than I can give here of my Millian interpretation of justice as higher pleasure, see Riley (2006), (2008a), (2009).

After making clear that everyone feels the immense importance of enjoying security from grievous injuries at the hands of others, because "on it we depend for all our immunity from evil, and for the whole value of all and every good, beyond the passing moment," he goes on to say that this "extraordinarily important and impressive kind of utility […] cannot be had, unless the machinery for providing it is kept unintermittedly in active play" (p. 251). Among other things, a legal code of justice must be enacted, and the rights and duties distributed under it must be continually enforced through the cooperative efforts of various government officials. Everyone must be taught the importance of the rule of law and of respecting others' rights even on those occasions where legal sanctions against violating these rights may be inexpedient.

> Our notion, therefore, of the claim we have on our fellow creatures to join in making safe for us the very groundwork of our existence, gathers feelings round it so much more intense than those concerned in any of the more common cases of utility, that the difference of degree (as is often the case in psychology) becomes a real difference in kind. The claim assumes *that character of absoluteness, that apparent infinity, and incommensurability with all other considerations*, which constitute the distinction between the feeling of right and wrong and that of ordinary expediency and inexpediency. (ibid, my emphasis)

Given that the security afforded by equal rights and duties is infinitely more valuable than any competing enjoyments, the social code of justice has lexical priority over any competing considerations of expediency. An individual's equal rights can never be legitimately overridden without his consent to promote other people's happiness, because even a bit of the higher pleasure of security – no matter who feels it – is intrinsically more valuable than any finite amount of lower pleasures, no matter how many different persons are assumed to experience them.

The qualitative superiority of the pleasure of justice over competing kinds of pleasures implies that any rational agent ought to give absolute priority to considerations of justice over competing considerations, in order to maximize his own pleasure "both in point of quality and quantity" (X, p. 214). Moreover, his maximization of his own happiness is logically compatible with his fellows' maximization of their personal happiness and thus with maximization of the general happiness, regarded as nothing but the simultaneous maximization of everyone's personal happiness. His own security is maximized if and only if everyone else's security is also maximized, because *equal rights are distributed to all*. Codes that distribute equal rights are the sole source of the higher pleasure of security associated with the moral sentiment of justice. No competing kinds of pleasures should ever override this enjoyable feeling of security according

to most people competently acquainted with the different kinds. Thus, a rational individual's own happiness necessarily coheres with other rational individuals' personal happiness to the extent of their equal rights. Neither personal utility nor general utility can be promoted by violating rights.

To even form a moral sentiment of justice, an individual must be able to identify the social rules of justice with which to comply. Until he knows the particular code which ought to be accepted, he cannot know the particular equal rights and correlative duties which ought to be recognized by everyone within his community as belonging to him and anyone else in like circumstances. But to establish rules and rights that are publicly endorsed by his society in its laws and conventions, the individual must participate with his fellows in a political process, given that an ideal observer is not available to determine the best moral and legal code. An open process of free discussion and debate is essential for fallible beings to assess proposals and converge on an optimal code, that is, a code that impartially distributes those particular equal rights and duties which, at least so far as fallible people can tell, maximize the amount of security enjoyed by anyone and everyone who possesses them. In short, the individual's sentiment of justice presupposes a utilitarian political procedure to select an optimal security-maximizing code upon which any just individual must rely to guide his conduct.

A considerable virtue of my interpretation, then, is that it allows us to see why, for Mill, a rational agent who seeks to maximize his own pleasure is motivated to become a qualitative utilitarian along Mill's lines: justice demands it, and the pleasure of justice is infinitely more valuable than any competing kinds of pleasures. The qualitative superiority of the pleasure of justice also provides an important clue as to why such infinite superiorities may be reasonable, even though at first glance it seems so counterintuitive to argue that a rational agent ought not to sacrifice even a bit of higher pleasure for any finite amount of lower pleasure.

Given that his pleasure of justice is infinitely more valuable than any competing enjoyments, it follows that an individual can never reasonably be *forced* to give up his own feeling of security associated with his own rights. He can reasonably refuse to waive his rights even if that would promote others' happiness, including their own feelings of security (made possible by their rights), as well as their other kinds of pleasant feelings. Given that each person's security is maximized only if equal rights are distributed to all, nobody can have a moral claim that others must give up their equal rights to promote his own security.[10] Each individual can

[10] This does not imply that any person's equal rights can guarantee *perfect* security for his vital concerns. The uncertainty of human affairs renders such absolute security impossible.

reasonably consider his feeling of security as a permanent kind of pleasure that can *always* be fully enjoyed in harmony with the similar feelings of security enjoyed by his fellows in possession of their recognized equal rights. There is no moral duty to sacrifice even a bit of one's security to promote others' enjoyments, and nobody is ever deserving of punishment for his failure to do so.

Despite the high quality of the feeling of security enjoyed by an individual in possession of equal rights, this moral kind of pleasure is not necessarily the highest kind. Some purely aesthetic and spiritual pleasures that can never conflict with justice may be of even higher quality. A noble individual in pursuit of these aesthetic pleasures may, for example, reasonably choose to waive his own rights so as to perform beautiful supererogatory actions that provide great benefits for others, even though by waiving his rights he sacrifices his own vital interests and perhaps even his life. Nevertheless, the noble person remains fallible, and so cannot legitimately presume to decide this issue for others. In other words, he cannot insist on his own infallibility by claiming that waiver of rights as the only reasonable course of action for every person who finds himself in circumstances like his.[11] He does not maintain, therefore, that others must also choose to waive their rights, or that society can legitimately compel such a waiver by threatening to punish those who fail to do so. Rather, he recognizes that others may reasonably refuse to waive their rights because (unlike noble people like him) they consider their own feelings of security as the highest kind of pleasure for themselves.

It remains the case that the moral pleasure of security *always* trumps any other kinds of pleasant feelings that can possibly come into conflict with it. Even a bit of the moral pleasure is intrinsically more valuable than any finite amount of a competing lower kind of enjoyment. The lower pleasures include intellectual pleasures associated with "merely expedient" ideas of objects that we use to satisfy our own everyday wants and purposes, as well as inchoate physical sensations (or "bodily" feelings) of pleasure that are experienced independently of our intellectual and imaginative capacities to form ideas of objects, reason about them, and so forth. But I cannot discuss any further the content of the Millian lexical hierarchy, or the important related issue of why higher kinds of enjoyments may reasonably be considered as infinitely more valuable than lower kinds.[12]

With suitable caveats, I think it is fair to say that my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities has considerable textual support, and also

[11] Mill explains in *On Liberty* what he means when he says that an individual assumes infallibility (XVIII, p. 234).

[12] For a more complete discussion of these matters, see Riley (2008b).

provides significant insights into the peculiar structure of Mill's qualitative hedonistic utilitarianism.[13] However that may be, it is striking that Schmidt-Petri never provides any textual support for his contrary view that Mill prescribes the sacrifice of higher pleasure for lower pleasure in some situations. He also neglects to trace out the implications of his reading of qualitative superiorities for the structure of Mill's utilitarianism. I now turn to consider Schmidt-Petri's interpretation of qualitative superiorities, with a view to discovering, if possible, why he apparently thinks he has answered, or can otherwise ignore, the objection that his interpretation has no textual support. As far as I am aware, Mill never says that higher pleasure can reasonably be traded off for lower pleasure in some situations. Moreover, to save his contrary reading, Schmidt-Petri cannot plausibly claim that Mill prescribes giving up more to get less of the same kind of pleasant feeling: a rational agent who seeks to achieve the most happiness cannot be expected to choose a smaller quantity of pleasure in preference to a larger quantity of the same kind of feeling.

4. Schmidt-Petri's Reduction of Quality to Quantity

One way to defuse the objection that Mill never says (and seems clearly to reject) that higher pleasure should ever be sacrificed for lower pleasure is to define the objection away. If I am not mistaken, this is Schmidt-Petri's strategy. He effectively redefines "quality" of pleasure so that it is subsumed within "quantity" of pleasure. As a result, a rational agent who

[13] Schmidt-Petri (2006, pp. 170–172) denies that there is any solid textual evidence for my view that, for Mill, the kind of pleasant feelings associated with the aesthetic emotions of beauty or sublimity may be qualitatively supreme, that is, infinitely more valuable than any other kinds of pleasures (with the important caveat that genuine aesthetic pleasures do not conflict with the pleasures of the moral sentiments). I continue to think that Mill's "Editorial Notes" are especially useful for the insight they provide into his conception of infinity, which is central, of course, to my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities. Moreover, even if his "Editorial Notes" do not provide much support for my suggestion that aesthetic pleasures may be qualitatively supreme, there is plenty of other textual support for the suggestion. Supererogatory acts of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others may bring a qualitatively supreme kind of aesthetic pleasure to agents capable of experiencing it (*Utilitarianism*, X, pp. 217–8; *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, X, pp. 337–340). The pursuit of a certain Periclean ideal of self-development may also bring such aesthetic pleasure (*On Liberty*, XVIII, p. 266). Such aesthetic pleasures do not conflict with the pleasures of the moral sentiments. But further clarification requires a more detailed discussion of the structure of Mill's hedonistic utilitarianism than I can provide here; see Riley (2009). I will only add that Schmidt-Petri makes surprisingly little effort to understand Mill's doctrine as I understand it. Indeed, he apparently does not realize that Mill intends his utilitarianism to extend to every aspect of human life and conduct, which he divides into the three great departments of prudence, morality and aesthetics (*System of Logic*, VIII, pp. 949–952). It is not merely a doctrine of morality inapplicable to aesthetics.

chooses to maximize the finite amount of his pleasant feeling or satisfaction with respect to any set of feasible outcomes (sources of pleasant feeling) reveals qualitative superiorities thus redefined as a matter of course in his choices.

How, then, does Schmidt-Petri interpret "quality" of pleasure and propose to distinguish it from "quantity"? In his view, "'quantity' […] measures the number of pleasures (how many there are)", where "pleasures" are understood as the objects or activities which are the *sources* of pleasant feeling (2006, p. 174). The greater the variety of sources, the larger the quantity of such "pleasures", keeping in mind that these various "pleasures" are all sources of a single kind of pleasant feeling that is homogeneous in quality. In contrast, "'quality' measures the pleasurableness of any one 'pleasure' (*how much* pleasure [in the sense of pleasant feeling] each of them [the sources] yields)" (ibid, emphasis added). Thus, "quality" now refers to the quantity of the one kind of pleasant feeling yielded by any source. A "pleasure" of high quality is merely a source that yields a large amount of the pleasant feeling, whereas a "pleasure" of low quality is a source that yields a small quantity of the same kind of pleasant feeling.

Schmidt-Petri's idea of "quality" is obviously an idea of "quantity". Moreover, it is easy to see that we are left with a purely quantitative hedonism, in which pleasant feelings may differ in quantity but display a common quality across their various sources. Pleasant feelings are assumed to be homogeneous in nature. Given that there are not any intrinsic differences in pleasant feelings, it now makes no sense to speak (as Mill does) of "the intrinsic superiority of the higher" kinds of pleasant feelings. We cannot speak at all of higher kinds of pleasant feelings that are always more valuable than lower kinds regardless of quantity.

Rather, we can now say everything that needs to be said about quality and quantity of pleasure in terms of a single preference ranking; there is no need for a lexical hierarchy of preference rankings, one for each of the plural, intrinsically different kinds of pleasant feelings. By defining the single ranking over the various feasible "pleasures" (sources of pleasant feeling), we can accommodate Schmidt-Petri's "quantity" aspect; and by ranking the sources such that the source that gives the largest quantity of pleasant feeling sits at the top of the ranking, followed next by the source that gives the second-largest quantity, and so forth down to source that yields the smallest amount of pleasant feeling, we can capture Schmidt-Petri's "quality" aspect. A rational agent who chooses the object or activity (or outcome) that sits at the top of his single preference ranking maximizes his pleasant feeling or satisfaction both in terms of "quantity" and "quality" thus understood.

This rational agent's choices reveal "qualitative superiorities" in the trivial sense that he chooses higher-quality *sources* of the one kind of pleasant feeling (that is, objects and activities that yield him a greater quantity of pleasant feeling) in preference to lower-quality sources. Schmidt-Petri emphasizes that this is "the way we use the word 'quality' most of the time" (2006, p. 166). He illustrates this "entirely natural way of understanding" quality by saying that Toyotas might be thought higher in quality than Hyundais: "The same point could be made by saying that Toyotas are *better than* Hyundais, given the standards used to evaluate cars" (ibid, original emphasis). Given that a Toyota is reasonably expected to yield a larger quantity of the same kind of pleasant feeling than a Hyundai does, a rational agent prefers the Toyota as a means to maximizing his happiness.

If we fiddle with the definition of the sources by comparing, say, one Toyota against two Hyundais, we can even show that a rational agent will sacrifice a higher-quality source or "pleasure" to get a lower-quality "pleasure" *because such a sacrifice yields him a larger quantity of the one kind of pleasant feeling*. This is the case if it is reasonable to suppose that the use of two Hyundais yields him more pleasant feeling in total than does the use of one Toyota. But, of course, such sacrifices are not sacrifices of *pleasant feeling.* On the contrary, he gets more pleasant feeling by making such choices. The outcome defined as "two Hyundais" sits higher than the outcome defined as "one Toyota" in his single preference ranking.[14]

I do not dispute that Mill could accept this entirely conventional picture of rational choice *in the context of any given kind of pleasant feeling*. The lexical hierarchy which is central to my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities consists of plural kinds of preference rankings, one for each of the intrinsically different kinds of pleasant feelings. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that Mill seems to work with purely ordinal preferences in the context of any given kind of pleasant feeling.[15] There is no reason to think that different qualities of pleasant *feelings* are implicated in the case of a choice between Toyotas and Hyundais. A rational person can say that the Toyota is better than the Hyundai, and choose the Toyota merely because he expects to get more of the same kind of pleasant feeling from using it. An ordinal preference that ranks Toyotas above Hyundais contains the relevant information about his expected feelings of pleasure.

[14] Similarly, if the sources of pleasant feeling are defined as bundles of different objects and activities, then it is still the case that an optimal bundle sits at the top of the rational agent's preference ranking. He chooses the bundle or mixture of things which yields him the most happiness.

[15] See e.g. Riley (2009).

Ordinal rankings are sometimes even referred to as "qualitative" rankings, in contrast to cardinal rankings, whose greater precision about how much a person prefers Toyotas over Hyundais is thought to entitle them to the "quantitative" label. But this usage of "quality" to refer to rough and imprecise estimates of "quantity" of pleasant feeling or satisfaction embodied in a preference ordering defined over the sources of pleasure, however common it may be, has nothing to do with intrinsically different kinds of pleasant feelings.

Schmidt-Petri's deployment of this conventional framework of rational choice to analyze genuine Millian qualitative superiorities is wrongheaded. His approach defines them away. Millian qualitative superiorities are evidently about intrinsically different kinds of pleasant *feelings*, such that higher kinds are superior in quality to lower kinds, regardless of quantity. Schmidt-Petri ignores Mill's references to intrinsic differences of feeling, and instead imposes a narrow and parched framework which takes for granted that all pleasant feelings or satisfactions are homogeneous in quality, however various their sources or objects. As a result, the pleasant feelings of the moral sentiment of justice, whose sole source, Mill suggests, is codes of equal rights and duties, must be treated by Schmidt-Petri and choice theorists of his ilk as similar in quality to the pleasures of eating ice cream or driving a car. Moral preference rankings (or judgments) are not intrinsically different than merely expedient preference rankings (tastes); both sorts of preferences must be fed into a single utilitarian calculus to determine the general good. But this simply misses what is, in my view, so distinctive about Mill's qualitative version of utilitarianism, and precludes any understanding of the ways in which it escapes from the well-known difficulties that plague the more familiar, purely quantitative versions of utilitarianism.[16]

In response to my complaint that his interpretation cannot capture genuine Millian qualitative superiorities because it reduces quality to quantity, Schmidt-Petri (2006, p. 176) in effect shrugs off and even disparages Mill's talk of "quality" in *Utilitarianism* as unimportant for an adequate understanding of Mill's utilitarianism! In contrast, from about 1833 Mill himself repeatedly emphasized that he subscribed to a version of utilitarianism which was significantly different than Bentham's official,

[16] For further discussion of genuine Millian qualitative superiorities and assorted impostors, see Riley (2008a). Riley (2009) discusses some of the ways in which Mill's utilitarianism as I understand it escapes from influential objections to the more familiar versions of utilitarianism. As far as I can tell, these more familiar versions have no convincing way to explain why a rational individual who pursues his own happiness can be motivated to pursue the general happiness.

purely quantitative version. In January 1834, for example, he writes to Thomas Carlyle:

> I am still, & am likely to remain, a utilitarian; though not one of "the people called utilitarians"; indeed, having scarcely one of my secondary premisses in common with them; nor a utilitarian at all, unless in quite another sense from what perhaps any one except myself understands by the word (*Earlier Letters*, XII, p. 207).

As his *Autobiography*, published in 1873, confirms (I, pp. 145, 185, 221), he did remain a utilitarian, although a highly unusual one. His utilitarianism enlarges upon Bentham's by admitting differences of quality among pleasant feelings, such that higher kinds of pleasant feelings are more valuable than lower kinds, regardless of quantity.[17] Unless this is appreciated, Mill's extraordinary version of the utilitarian doctrine remains hidden from view.

In fact, Schmidt-Petri's approach merely delivers Mill into the arms of his enemies. When Sidgwick, Moore and others in their train attack Mill, one of their key objections is that hedonism (and hedonistic utilitarianism) cannot consistently accommodate Millian qualitative distinctions. Some basic value other than pleasant feeling must be used, they argue, to draw these distinctions, such that some kinds of pleasant feelings are held to be intrinsically more valuable than others.[18] As Moore puts it, "'pleasant' must, if words are to have any meaning at all, denote some one quality common to all the things that are pleasant".[19] My interpretation rebuts this objection by suggesting that the higher kinds of pleasant feelings are infinitely more valuable *as pleasures* than the lower kinds. If Schmidt-Petri is right, however, Moore and the others have been deluding themselves all along. These critics have repeatedly failed to recognize that Mill is really in their camp, because they have all failed to see that he is speaking of "quality" in what Schmidt-Petri calls "the 'usual' way", namely, to refer to objects and activities that give us more of a single kind of pleasant feeling than others do. The "usual" qualitative differences among the various sources of pleasant feeling are entirely consistent with Moore's view that

[17] In his *Autobiography*, Mill describes in some detail his progress through three main stages, to wit, a period in youth when he received a remarkable education, orchestrated by his father, James Mill, in Bentham's utilitarianism, followed by a period in his twenties when he rebelled against the Benthamic school and immersed himself in the works of its philosophical opponents, and then the remainder of his life when (with the help of Harriet Taylor, his wife as of 1851) he developed his novel version of utilitarianism that "enlarges" upon Bentham's version. Riley (1998, pp. 3–27) provides a summary.

[18] This sort of objection is not restricted to a hedonistic conception of utility. An analogous objection can be stated in terms of any conception of utility.

[19] Moore (1959), p. 78.

hedonism requires a single kind of pleasant feeling that displays a common quality across its sources.

I think it unlikely that Moore and the others have failed to recognize their target. Rather than selling Mill out to his critics, Schmidt-Petri should seriously reconsider my version of the so-called "standard" interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities. Perhaps he will discover that there is something to my interpretation if he abandons the strategic response to it which he has pursued to date, to wit, a strategy of misrepresenting it, ignoring the textual support for it, and pretending that he can legitimately dismiss it based on a "comprehensive" assessment of Mill's writings.

5. Metaphysical Essences

I shall conclude with a brief discussion of metaphysical essences, because Schmidt-Petri also seeks to link my interpretation of Millian qualitative superiorities to what he calls the "essentialist reading" of quality (2006, p. 166). According to the essentialist reading, he says, two things are different in quality when they are different in "essence", that is, in their fundamental substance. After distinguishing between the essentialist reading and his own "entirely natural" and commonly accepted understanding of quality, he announces that "Mill […] is not talking [in *Utilitarianism* II 5] about the *essences* of pleasures, he is talking about how we can conclusively *determine* when one pleasure is qualitatively superior to another" (p. 167, original emphasis). In his view, the relevant passage "is about epistemology, and not about the metaphysics, of pleasures" (ibid).

But this accusation that my interpretation presupposes metaphysical essences is a red herring. Rejection of the essentialist reading does not require adoption of Schmidt-Petri's "usual" reading of quality; there are other ways to read quality. Mill clearly rejects all talk of "essences", understood as fundamental "substances", "quiddities", or "noumena" that lie behind the phenomena we perceive, including feelings of pleasure. He argues that there is no need to assume such "fictitious entities" (the phrase is Bentham's) in order to construct valid ideas of phenomena, that is, ideas warranted by the available scientific evidence.[20] By implication, when he refers to "the intrinsic superiority of the higher" pleasures, he does not make any metaphysical commitment to "essences". Rather, a pleasant feeling's "intrinsic nature" must be understood in some non-essentialist way. As I understand it, the intrinsic nature of a pleasant feeling is equivalent to a warranted general conception or idea of the feeling constructed

[20] See, especially, Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, X, pp. 267–298. Mill generally remains agnostic about the possibility of a fundamental ontology.

by those who have competently experienced the feeling. It is how rational people (or, if they disagree, most of them) implicitly conceive of the pleasant feeling and confirm its existence on the basis of a social process of inquiry. In the case of something so elementary as "pleasant feeling", the social process of inquiry – the method of proposing ideas as hypotheses and testing them using the available evidence, including the evidence of introspection – involves critical discussion and testing hypotheses about human psychology. This in turn involves analysis of the ways in which the term "pleasant feeling" is being used in ordinary language.[21]

As a matter of logic, a rational hedonist – a rational individual who affirms that happiness understood as pleasant feeling does/should by itself ultimately motivate human conduct – implicitly affirms some general abstract idea of what pleasant feeling is. But which idea is warranted? The hedonist might, for instance, assert that pleasant feelings are all of the same kind, all of them displaying a common quality whatever their sources or objects. In that case, he must also say that equal quantities of pleasure are always equal in value. As Mill notes, this is simply a "truth of arithmetic" (X, p. 258, note). After all, the hedonist believes that pleasure alone is valuable in itself and, by assumption, pleasant feelings always feel similar in nature. To assert propositions about quantities, the rational agent needs a concept of "quantity", of course, so that anyone can understand what it means to say that there is "more" rather than "less" of a thing such as pleasant feeling. Moreover, the sole test for determining how much pleasure can be expected from one source or another is, as Mill tells us, the general suffrage of those who have competently experienced the pleasures: "What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both?" (X, p. 213).

Hedonists and their critics usually take it for granted that pleasant feelings invariably do display a common quality. But Mill is no ordinary hedonist. He thinks that an extraordinary idea of "pleasant feeling" is warranted by the available evidence. He affirms that pleasant feelings are of

[21] I recognize that much more needs to be said to clarify these remarks. Perhaps it will help the reader if I state my opinion that the American pragmatists, despite their rejection of hedonism, were strongly influenced by Mill in their views of epistemology and metaphysics. William James dedicated his *Pragmatism* to Mill. John Dewey in particular made clear in various works that the theory of knowledge cannot be neatly separated from our ideas of what the subjects of knowledge are; see, for example, Dewey (1984). Warranted ideas of phenomena, including pleasant feelings, do not depend on metaphysics understood in terms of "essences". The ideas of phenomena that emerge from a process of rational inquiry may be said to constitute knowledge of the "intrinsic natures" of the phenomena. But I must leave these matters for another occasion.

different kinds, such that higher kinds are superior in quality to lower kinds, regardless of quantity. He must continue to say, with the more conventional hedonist, that equal quantities of pleasant feelings of the same quality are equal in value. But now he adds that, consistently with this, a higher kind of pleasure is more pleasant in quality than a lower kind, irrespective of quantity. To assert propositions about qualities, he needs a concept of "quality" so that anyone can understand what it means to say that there is a pleasant feeling of higher quality than another, regardless of the quantities of each. In my view, "quality" in this context must be understood as an infinite difference – a difference of kind, not merely a difference of finite degree. A higher pleasure feels infinitely more valuable as pleasure, so that no finite quantity of lower pleasure can ever feel equal in value to the higher pleasure. Again, as Mill tells us, the test of quality is no different than the test for determining quantity. Those competently acquainted with both pleasures confirm a difference of quality if and only if they generally refuse to sacrifice the one pleasure for any finite amount of the other.

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