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Author(s): Benjamin Gibbs

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Higher and Lower Pleasures

BENJAMIN GIBBS

In the second chapter of *Utilitarianism* John Stuart Mill writes:

It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.¹

Mill affirms that hedonic quality and quantity can only be measured by the feelings and judgment of experienced and competent assessors. If all or almost all of those who are 'competently acquainted' with both of two pleasures agree in giving a decided preference to one of them, then that pleasure is the more desirable. If it is preferred to any quantity of the other pleasure, then

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).

Now it is unquestionable, Mill declares, that persons who are familiar with the pleasures of the higher faculties—the intellect, the feelings and imagination, the moral sentiments—prefer these pleasures markedly to the lower, purely physical pleasures, and would not be willing to relinquish the higher pleasures for any amount of the lower, even though they know the higher pleasures to be 'attended with a greater amount of discontent'. Therefore the higher pleasures are superior in quality and intrinsically more desirable.

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides (p. 212).

This much-quoted argument is usually discussed without due consideration of its ambiguities or recognition of its merit. Mill's introduction of the distinction between quantity and quality, and his doctrine of

¹ *Collected Works*, Vol. X (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 211. All quotations from *Utilitarianism* refer to this edition.

higher and lower pleasures, are represented as merely *ad hoc*, more or less ineffectual devices whereby Mill hoped to dissociate utilitarianism from its philistine friends: notably Jeremy Bentham. Doubtless Mill did intend, among other things, to show that utilitarianism need not involve the brutal insensibility conveyed by the dictum he attributes to Bentham: 'Quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry'.² But Mill's moral theory is more than a revised and qualified Benthamism. It is fortified and complicated by elements drawn from other sources, including the Stoic, Epicurean and Christian traditions, German Romanticism, with its ideal of individual self-development, and above all the moral psychology of Plato and Aristotle.³ Partly because of his eclecticism, and because he is correcting the misapprehensions of a popular audience,⁴ Mill is less than perfectly rigorous in his use of terminology, and he employs a flamboyant, oratorical style which inclines him to over-state and under-qualify his case. But if some necessary provisos are inserted and a certain amount of extrapolation and restatement is undertaken, Mill's argument is more coherent and plausible than is commonly supposed.

1. The Origins of Mill's Argument

It has been suggested by Rem B. Edwards⁵ that Mill was influenced by Francis Hutcheson's doctrine that the pleasures associated with knowledge and virtue are 'incomparably more excellent and beatifick than the most intense and lasting enjoyments of the lower kinds'.⁶ But Hutcheson might have anticipated Mill without in any way influencing him. Mill would have no use for Hutcheson's central notion of a 'moral sense'; and in Mill's writings Hutcheson's name is mentioned only rarely and in passing.

² 'Bentham', *Works*, Vol. X, 113.

³ Mill's debt to Plato has been pointed out by Grote, Shorey, Pappe and others, including (repeatedly) Mill himself. It is noteworthy that several of the German Romantics who impressed Mill were inspired by Plato and Platonism, e.g. Schleiermacher, to whose Platonic scholarship Mill refers appreciatively in his Notes on the dialogues. Mill's writings on Greek philosophy have been re-published (1978) as Volume XI of the Toronto edition of the *Collected Works*.

⁴ *Utilitarianism* was first published in 1861 as a series of articles in *Fraser's Magazine*.

⁵ *Pleasures and Pains: a Theory of Qualitative Hedonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 70.

⁶ Francis Hutcheson, *Collected Works* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), Vol. V, 117.

We should look much earlier for the sources of Mill's doctrine, in what he describes as 'the lofty inspiration of Plato and the judicious utilitarianism of Aristotle . . . the two headsprings of ethical as of all other philosophy'.⁷ The argument in the second chapter of *Utilitarianism* runs closely parallel to Plato's argument in the ninth book of the *Republic* (580d–583a) that there are different kinds of pleasure corresponding with the different faculties;⁸ that the greatest pleasures are those of the highest faculty and the best and pleasantest of lives that which is characterized by its exercise; and that this is acknowledged and confirmed by the testimony of the wise, who alone have experienced all the varieties of pleasure and whose judgment, therefore, alone is authoritative. Plato's argument intends to compare different pleasures and modes of living, not in terms of which are nobler or baser, morally better or worse, but simply in terms of which are more pleasant and less painful (581e–582a). Likewise, Mill sets out to determine 'what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure . . . irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it' (p. 211), and 'which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences' (p. 213). Plato says the criterion of sound judgment is experience combined with insight and reasoning; and Mill agrees:

The test of quality . . . [is] the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison (p. 214).

Plato says the physical appetites and pleasures are particularly intense or vehement (580e, 584bc); Mill implies the same when he says that mental pleasures are 'preferable in kind, apart from the question of intensity' (p. 213). The verdict of the only competent judges is, according to both Plato and Mill, that the pleasures of the mind are preferable to any amount of physical pleasure (Plato, 581e; Mill, p. 211). The person who is dedicated to the pleasures of the mind will lead the pleasantest of lives (Plato, 583a); or as Mill puts it, his 'mode of existence' is 'the most grateful to the feelings' (p. 213).

These similarities encouraged Paul Shorey to write of Mill's 'direct adoption of the argument of the *Republic*'.⁹ R. C. Cross and A. D.

⁷ *On Liberty*, *Works*, Vol. XVIII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 235.

⁸ Plato divides the soul into three faculties, each with its own kind of pleasure (580d). Mill is content with a duality.

⁹ *Platonism Ancient and Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1938), 231.

Woozley also draw attention to the likeness;¹⁰ though they suggest that Mill's version of the argument is free from a weakness which vitiates Plato's. They deplore Plato's assumption 'that there could be such a thing as an absolutely most pleasant life, irrespective of individuals with their likes and dislikes' (p. 266), and they commend Mill because, in their view, he 'carefully refrains from arguing that higher-grade pleasures are more pleasant' (p. 265). It seems to me that Cross and Woozley are mistaken in their reading of Mill. It is true that he does not actually say mental pleasures are more pleasant than physical, but he comes close to it when he says the question is 'what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure' (p. 211).¹¹ And though he does not claim (neither does Plato) that the supremely pleasant life can be identified without reference to the likes and dislikes of individuals, he does claim (as does Plato) that it can be identified without considering the likes and dislikes of *all* individuals. The (absolutely) pleasantest life, according to Mill and Plato, is that which is deemed to be such by the wise and good, who have discernment combined with experience of what they are judging.

Mill's version of the argument does contain an admission not made by Plato: that the wise and good may 'be persuaded that the fool, the dunce or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs' (p. 211). This may have suggested to Cross and Woozley their hypothesis that Mill never intended to claim, as Plato did, that the good life is intrinsically more pleasant. But Mill supplements his admission with a distinction, and the result is a development of Plato's argument rather than a denial of it. He says that to suppose that the good life requires a sacrifice of happiness, and 'that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior', is to confound 'the two very different ideas, of happiness, and content' (p. 212). Happiness as Mill conceives it does not consist in just any kind of satisfaction, but rather in the satisfaction that comes from exercising and developing the higher, specifically human faculties. Happiness is to be found principally in the energetic exercise of intelligence, imagination and skill, and the practice of the moral virtues. A being of inferior faculties can more easily gain satisfaction of his desires and be made fully content, because he has low capacities of enjoyment. But he is not capable of the same level of happiness as a person of superior intelligence and character. The higher being is more liable to pain, must suffer more discontent, and will never be perfectly happy; yet his condition *is* the happier and better, and he knows that it is:

¹⁰ *Plato's Republic* (London: Macmillan, 1964), 265.

¹¹ See further Henry R. West, 'Mill's Qualitative Hedonism', *Philosophy* 51 (1976), 97–101.

A highly-endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But . . . [the imperfections] will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify (p. 212).

Plato would agree that a person can achieve satisfaction of his ruling desires without achieving genuine happiness. He argues that most pleasures of the flesh consist merely in the diminution or cessation of pain, the relief of distress or the assuaging of physical need; they are not, as intellectual activities are, real, positive pleasures; they are neutral states of rest or peace intermediate between pleasure and pain (583c–585a). Plato might agree also that a person may be genuinely happy though not perfectly content, because of having good desires which he is unable to satisfy. Certainly Plato supposes that the philosopher struggling to solve a problem in geometry or metaphysics will not be content till he has succeeded; and that even so, while he is engaged in this struggle, the philosopher's state of mind is pleasanter and happier than that of the vulgarian who is blithely ignorant of all such matters. 'Socrates dissatisfied' need not merely be undergoing a disagreeable experience; he may be working actively and absorbedly through the preliminary stages of an intellectual advance. The pleasure of learning is not merely, like the pleasure of quenching one's thirst, a release from discomfort and the remedying of a deficiency. Both the search and the discovery of knowledge are intrinsically enjoyable (581e).

Mill would have found further Platonic support for his doctrine in the *Laws*. In the review of Grote's *Plato* which Mill published in 1866, he says that in the *Laws* 'Plato affirms that people will never be persuaded to prefer virtue unless convinced of its being the path of greatest pleasure' (*Works*, Vol. XI, p. 418); presumably the reference is to *Laws* 663ab. He must have been familiar with the passages a few pages earlier, where Plato says that pleasure and pain are a child's first experiences and the stuff of which virtue and vice are formed, requiring to be trained so that one habitually likes what one ought to like and dislikes what one ought to dislike (653ac); and that works of musical art are excellent in the measure that they give pleasure to persons of superior virtue and education (658e–659a).

Mill speaks of higher faculties as well as of higher pleasures. What makes some faculties 'higher' and others 'lower'? Unlike Plato, Mill gives no clear answer to this question. It might be thought that he supposes the relative eminence of a faculty to be derived from that of its proper pleasures; that what makes the mental faculties 'higher' is the fact that exercising and developing them is pleasanter and more desir-

able than exercising and developing the powers of sensation. But Mill would put it the other way round. The higher pleasures are so called because they belong to the higher faculties, not vice versa. And the eminence of the faculties is to be explained in Platonic terms. The higher faculties have superior political status in the constitution of the personality. Certainly Mill believes, like Plato, that the mental powers which are characteristic of human nature ought to govern and regulate the animal appetites. But neither Plato nor Mill attempts to deduce the hedonic superiority of mental activities from the political supremacy of the faculties. Their argument is an appeal to experience, not an *a priori* inference from the relations of dominance and subordination between parts of the soul.

Despite the similarities between their arguments, however, it is a moot point whether Mill derived the idea from Plato and whether, if he did, he was conscious of having done so. Notwithstanding his veneration for Plato—‘the master-mind of antiquity’¹²—and his consciousness of owing a greater intellectual debt to Plato than to any other thinker,¹³ Mill always regarded Plato as, at best, a half-hearted utilitarian. In his ‘Notes on the *Protagoras*’ he observes approvingly that the principle of utility is ‘as broadly stated, and as emphatically maintained’ by Socrates in the *Protagoras* ‘as ever it was by Epicurus or Bentham’; but Mill proposes this as an instance of the fact that some of the opinions canvassed in the *Protagoras* are ‘decidedly adverse’ to ‘the tendency of (Plato’s) mind’.¹⁴ In the *Autobiography*, describing his early education, Mill says ‘the lofty moral standard exhibited in the writings of Plato operated upon me with great force’ (p. 49); but later he came to admire Plato more for his dialectical method of investigation than for his doctrines (p. 25). In the review of Grote’s *Plato* he commends Plato’s doctrine that virtue consists in the rule of ‘the calculating principle’, reason; but then complains that Plato does not say *what* reason is to apply itself to: ‘When . . . the test of Pain and Pleasure is abandoned, no other elements are shown to us which the Measuring Art is to be employed to measure . . . Plato does not tell us’.¹⁵ Mill refers to Plato’s lost lecture on the Good, which, according to Aristotle’s report of it, ‘turned on transcendental properties of numbers’; and Mill comments: ‘Thus did the noble light of philosophy in Plato go out in a fog of mystical Pythagoreanism’.¹⁶ These reproaches suggest that when, dur-

¹² ‘Notes on the *Protagoras*’, *Works*, Vol. XI, 40.

¹³ *Autobiography*, *Works*, Vol. I (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 25.

¹⁴ *Works*, Vol. XI, 61.

¹⁵ *Works*, Vol. XI, 419–420.

¹⁶ 421.

ing 1865, Mill re-read the whole of Plato in Greek to prepare himself for writing his review of Grote, he did not notice the similarity of that passage in *Republic* IX to the argument in his own recently published *Utilitarianism*.

If Mill did not derive the argument from Plato, then perhaps he got the idea of it from Aristotle, whose 'judicious utilitarianism' would have been more in harmony with Mill's own ethical opinions. In the *Autobiography* Mill tells how, in his twelfth year, he was made to read Aristotle's *Rhetoric*,

which, as the first expressly scientific treatise on any moral or psychological subject which I had read, and containing many of the best observations of the ancients on human nature and life, my father made me study with peculiar care, and throw the matter of it into synoptic tables (p. 9).

The book made a lasting impression on him. In his review of Grote's *Aristotle* Mill describes the *Rhetoric* as 'one of the richest repositories of incidental remarks on human nature and human affairs that the ancients have bequeathed to us'.¹⁷ When the youthful Mill studied the discussion of pleasure and utility in Book I, Ch. 7, he would have found remarks such as these:

That is a greater good which would be chosen by a better man (1364b21).

That is the better thing which is considered so . . . by authorized judges . . . authorities and experts (1365a2–4).

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* too, Aristotle repeatedly invokes the principle that those things are truly valuable and most pleasant which are judged to be so by the wise and good.¹⁸ The majority have no idea of what is noble and truly pleasant because they have never experienced it (1179b15–16). Aristotle says 'No one would choose to live with the mind of a child throughout his life, however much he were to be pleased at the things that children are pleased at' (1174a1–3). This anticipates Mill's assertion that no intelligent being would consent to 'sink into what he believes to be a lower grade of existence', even if he were to be assured of having all the pleasures proper to that existence (p. 212). Mill suggests that the inferior being, who contents himself with sensuous pleasures, may not have to suffer the discontent which afflicts those whose intelligence and feelings are highly developed, but neither does he share in their happiness: 'he feels not at all the good which those

¹⁷ *Works*, Vol. XI, 505.

¹⁸ See 1099a13–20, 1113a30ff., 1170a15–16, 1176a15ff., 1176b23–27. Cf. also *E.E.* 1235b35ff.

imperfections qualify' (p. 212). This is reminiscent of Aristotle's remark that we do not call animals or children happy (*eudaimōn*), because they are not capable of properly human activity.¹⁹ Anyone can enjoy the pleasures of the body, a slave as much as the noblest human being, but no one supposes a slave to participate in *eudaimonia* (1177a5–10). In the *Politics* Aristotle says that slaves and animals are not members of a human community, because they cannot choose their own mode of life and do not participate in *eudaimonia* (1280a32ff.). Even this might have been acceptable to Mill. He disapproves of Aristotle's defence of slavery as a social institution;²⁰ but in the third chapter of his essay *On Liberty*, and elsewhere, Mill shows a lordly contempt for the servile mentality which lets itself be subject to 'the despotism of custom'. Probably, however, he learnt this attitude from Plato rather than Aristotle.²¹

Aristotle's discussion of the virtue regulating pleasures of the flesh in *Nic. Eth.* III, 10, may throw light on how Mill conceives 'lower' pleasures. Aristotle says that temperance (*sōphrosunē*) and its opposite are concerned with bodily pleasures, but not with all such: not with visual pleasures—colours, shapes, paintings—nor auditory ones—music, acting—nor even olfactory pleasures. Temperance is concerned with the pleasures of taste and above all touch, which human beings have in common with other animals: the pleasures of eating, drinking, sex and physical comfort. These are what Mill too seems to have in mind when he speaks of 'a beast's pleasures' (p. 210). He would admit, as would Aristotle, that exultation in the palpable may have an authentically human rather than beastly character, the subject's experience being conditioned and interpreted by his imagination, memory and educated judgment. The gourmet's refined appreciation of a delicacy is not strictly comparable with the jubilation of a pig with its snout in the trough. Nevertheless, gastronomic pleasure is essentially physical rather than mental in that sensations of touch and taste are its proper object. Like Aristotle, Mill seems not to regard the delectations of music and the visual arts as 'lower', presumably because they exercise the higher faculties and are confined to human beings. But simple, unsophisticated visual and auditory pleasures—a child's naive, sensuous delight in bright colours and tunes, for example—might have to be counted among 'lower' pleasures.²²

¹⁹ 1099b33ff., cf. 1178b24–28.

²⁰ See 'Grote's Aristotle', *Works*, Vol. XI, 505.

²¹ On the similarities between Plato's ideal of the autonomous individual and Mill's, see B. Gibbs, 'Autonomy and Authority in Education', *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 13 (1979), especially 122–128.

²² Cf. Mill's editorial footnotes to James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of*

Mill's conception of happiness perhaps owes something to Plato's *Gorgias*; but it corresponds more exactly with Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. Aristotle argues that happiness resides in activities which are proper to human existence, and in distinctively human pleasures (1176a24ff.). He defines *eudaimonia* as activity of the highest faculties in accordance with perfect virtue (1177a10–17). Happiness requires exertion, he says; it does not consist in mere amusement (1177a1–2). Mill, in similar vein, defines happiness as 'an existence made up of many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive' (p. 215). Passive pleasures, presumably, are experiences demanding little effort or concentration, which gladden, flatter, divert, amuse, relax, thrill or intoxicate their subject. Many of the pleasures which come from the gratification of physical desire and the need for rest and recreation would be 'passive pleasures'. But not all 'passive pleasures' are pleasures of 'the animal nature'. In the *Autobiography* Mill speaks of the need to cultivate 'the passive susceptibilities' (p. 147), and refers to his own experience of the consolations to be found in music, poetry and the beauties of nature. When he speaks of 'active pleasures', he is thinking of activities and enterprises which require hard work, close attention and perseverance. Such activities do not soothe our feelings or coddle our bodily appetites; they offer no enticement to the weary, the indolent, the dissolute or the frivolous. Yet they can be highly enjoyable, interesting, stimulating, engrossing, fascinating, or in some such way intrinsically rewarding, just because of the demands they make on character and skill.

the Human Mind, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, 1878), 242, 246–247, 252–255. My interpretation of these passages differs somewhat from that of Susan L. Feagin, whose interesting discussion in *Philosophy* 58 (1983) seems to me to be marred by conflating Mill's categorial division of 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures and differing degrees of excellence *within* those categories. Thus she says (247) that Mill 'thought much of the music of Mozart the source of lower pleasure', and (249) that the kind of pleasure Mozart's music gives 'is not generally aesthetic because not derived from the use of the higher faculties'. Feagin refers to Mill's assertion that Mozart's music excels in 'physical' aspects such as harmony and melody, while Beethoven's excels in 'expression'. But Mill does not say Mozart's music is devoid of 'expression', only that Beethoven's excels it in this respect while being excelled by it in 'physical' respects. Perhaps Mill did, like other nineteenth-century Romantics, believe Beethoven's music to be more sublime and generally finer than Mozart's. But this comparative judgment would imply only that, in the class of 'higher' pleasures, some are higher than others. It would not consign Mozart's music to the category of swinish or sub-human pleasures. Had that been Mill's opinion, he would never have been tormented, as he says he was, by the thought that 'there could not be room for a long succession of Mozarts ... to strike out ... entirely new and surpassingly rich veins of musical beauty' (*Autobiography*, *Works*, Vol. I, 149).

The tendency of ordinary usage is to limit the extension of the adjectives 'pleasant', 'enjoyable', etc., to what Mill calls 'passive pleasures', and to contrast pleasure with goods which, though desired for their own sakes, are arduous of attainment. Thus one might say Hume's philosophical writings are more *enjoyable* than Kant's, without meaning they are superior in quality or importance; merely that they are more entertaining, wittier, easier to comprehend, and so on. Kant's abstruse themes and elaborate arguments make him more formidable to the reader; he is not amusing, his style is less attractive, he requires absolute concentration, his rewards are less easily won. Yet maybe for all that Kant is the greater thinker, and serious students might relish the challenge of his writings more than the charm of Hume's. If so, then in Mill's terms Kant's writings are, after all, intrinsically more pleasing. The point is obscured by Mill's own deference to ordinary usage when he distinguishes 'desire, the state of passive sensibility', which has pleasure as its object, from 'will, the active phenomenon', which may continue working under the influence of habit long after the anticipation of pleasure or pain which originally motivated it has ceased.²³ This might suggest that pleasure is essentially a modification of 'passive sensibility'. But Mill cannot intend this, because his 'active pleasures' are activities rather than mere experiences, and they may give more distress than comfort to the sensibility. The pleasant life need not be cosy, self-indulgent or luxurious. For the competitive, ambitious, adventurous character, and for the psychologically similar personality motivated by a powerful sense of duty, vocation or mission, the most agreeable mode of existence may be a hard, laborious, even grim affair. Mill says that anyone sufficiently intelligent and generous to bear a part in conquering the sources of human suffering 'will draw a noble enjoyment from the contest itself' (p. 217). He does not recommend total abstinence from passive pleasures; he believes that they have a part to play in the good life. But he insists that active pleasures should have a 'decided predominance': which shows his conception of happiness to be eudaemonic rather than hedonistic, Aristotelian rather than Epicurean or Benthamite. There is perhaps a muted criticism of the Epicurean ideal of *ataraxia* in Mill's remark (p. 215) that a life of much tranquillity may contain very little pleasure, and though many are content with it, it is much less than happiness. As for Bentham: only one of the 'simple pleasures' distinguished in the *Principles of Morals and Legislation* seems to be what Mill would count as an 'active pleasure'—namely,

²³ 238. Cf. also *A System of Logic*, VI, ii, 4; *Works*, Vol. VIII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 842–843.

pleasures of skill;²⁴ and the fastidious Mill might have felt some embarrassment on reading Bentham's long, sentimental footnote²⁵ which enumerates and mentally wallows in eight kinds of passive pleasure supposed to be felt while contemplating a country scene.²⁶

2. 'Quantity' versus 'Quality'

Mill does not explain the key terms 'quantity' and 'quality'. He simply uses them, assuming a certain opposition between them. On the basis of his usage, however, it is possible to construct an account which I think he would have accepted.

Quantity has to do with number, size, magnitude or extent. To give the quantity of something is to state how much there is of it, its position or level or degree on some numerical scale of measurement; its amount, dimensions, volume, amplitude, duration, intensity or strength.

Quality is more complex. As the etymology of the word indicates,²⁷ it may denote simply the kind, class, sort, type, character or nature of a thing. To state the quality of something, in this sense, is to perform an act of simple classification, which need not involve comparison, evaluation or assessment, saying what kind of thing it is or what it is like. Often, however, 'quality' denotes rather a thing's value or merit or degree of excellence, its position on some scale of desirability. Quality in the sense of value may be related to quality in the sense of kind, for kinds differ in worth as well as in essence. They possess higher or lower degrees of excellence; they fall into grades, ranks, orders and hierarchies. A thing may be good as a thing of a certain kind, or because it is of a certain kind. But quality in the sense of value need not be related thus to kinds; it may be related to quantity, or to some other category.²⁸ A numerical scale of measurement may be so correlated with some scale of value that things which are related highly on the numerical scale are rated correspondingly highly on the scale of value. This is not to say that the term 'quantity' sometimes *means* 'value', as 'quality' does; only that it is possible for a thing to have value in proportion to

²⁴ *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, W. Harrison (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), 152.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, end of Ch. 5, 163.

²⁶ Mill says in the *Autobiography* (*Works*, Vol. I, 151) that 'the love of rural objects and natural scenery' was one of the strongest of his own 'pleasurable susceptibilities'; but the passage which immediately follows this admission in the original draft—a romantic description of a summer evening's walk beside the Thames—he later suppressed.

²⁷ *Qualis* = of what kind.

²⁸ Aristotle says 'good' is predicated in all the categories of being: *Nic. Eth.* 1096a19–29.

how much there is of it, as well as in proportion to what kind of thing it is. A thing can differ qualitatively (sc. in value) from another thing *in virtue of* differing from it quantitatively. Sometimes quality outweighs quantity in determining value, but not always. One good thing may be preferred to another because, though its intrinsic merits are slighter, it is available in greater abundance.

We may now state Mill's doctrine a little more precisely. He thinks the quality of pleasures, in the sense of their value or degree of desirability, is proportional to their kind or intrinsic nature rather than to their quantity. A greater quantity of pleasure is preferable to a lesser, other things being equal, but often the 'other things' are not equal; in particular, pleasures differ in kind as well as in amount, and a small quantity of pleasure of one kind may be preferable to a great quantity of another kind. The pleasures associated with the 'more elevated' faculties are superior both in kind and absolutely to the pleasures associated with 'animal appetites', as is shown by the more or less unanimous verdict of persons who are 'competently acquainted' with both. Mill seems to admit that lower pleasures may be more intense; but he says the pleasures of the mind may have 'a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account' (p. 211). The word 'quality' here means 'kind' or 'intrinsic nature'; 'account' means 'value' or 'importance'.

Of course, as Mill himself observes (p. 212), bodily pleasures differ in kind, amount and value not only from mental pleasures but from each other. Thus, if there were a clear consensus of opinion among connoisseurs of wine that it is pleasanter to drink a single glass of Château d'Yquem than an entire bottle of ordinary Sauternes, Mill would conclude that the former pleasure is superior in kind, and preferable outright, to the latter. But his chief concern is to establish the superiority of the whole class of mental pleasures to physical ones.

Jeremy Bentham would have rejected the idea that a pleasure might be preferable simply because of its intrinsic nature and not because there was more of it. Bentham does not deny, however, that there are different kinds as well as different quantities of pleasure. In Chapter V of *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, which is headed 'Pleasures and Pains, Their Kinds', he distinguishes no less than fourteen varieties of 'simple pleasures'. Nor would he have denied the superiority of mental pleasures to physical, provided it could be explained in purely quantitative terms. Bentham distinguishes five quantitative variables²⁹ which are involved in determining the total amount of pleasure given by a particular experience: *intensity*, *duration*, *fecundity*, *purity* and *extent*. By 'intensity' he seems to mean relative pleas-

²⁹ He calls them 'dimensions'.

antness per unit of duration. One pleasure is more intense than another if it is more pleasant without lasting longer. But a pleasure might be less intense than another, yet greater in total quantity because it lasted longer or surpassed the other in fecundity, purity or extent. Compared with physical pleasures, the pleasures of the mind may lack intensity; but if they score high marks in the other quantitative tests, they may still be greater in amount overall. Among others, D. H. Monro has suggested that the difference between higher and lower pleasures might turn out in the end to be a purely quantitative difference:

The so-called 'higher' pleasures are just those that afford a more lasting satisfaction than the 'lower' pleasures (duration), that enlarge our horizons and so open up new possibilities of pleasure (fecundity), and that are less likely to be followed eventually by the pain of satiety and boredom (purity). These are the characteristics that distinguish intellectual activity . . . from purely physical pleasure.³⁰

Monro disregards the remaining quantitative factor mentioned by Bentham: 'extent', the number of persons affected by the pleasure. If the number of persons capable of gaining much enjoyment from elevated and edifying activities is relatively small, then physical pursuits and experiences may after all deliver a greater total amount of pleasure. Think of the advertisement which claims that a certain beer 'has given more pleasure to Europe than all the operas of Mozart, Wagner and Verdi put together'. The factor of 'extent' may be irrelevant to assessments of *individual* utility. What pleases me does so in the measure that it does regardless of the number of other persons pleased at the same thing. But Bentham's viewpoint is that of a social reformer, and his assessment of particular pleasures must take account of their distribution. The most pertinent illustration is Bentham's eulogy of children's games, made famous in Mill's misquoted version. Bentham's own words are as follows:

Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few.³¹

The complexities and difficulties which ensue upon introducing the factor of 'extent' into calculations of utility are, of course, immense, and they are not peculiar to Bentham's form of utilitarianism.

In any case, it is clear that *Mill* would not accept a reduction of qualitative to quantitative differences. He agrees that mental pleasures

³⁰ 'Bentham', in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. I, Paul Edwards (ed.) (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 283.

³¹ *Works*, J. Bowring (ed.), Vol. II (Edinburgh: Tait, 1843), 253.

are, on the whole, longer-lasting, purer and cheaper than physical pleasures; but he believes this is only part of the story: mental pleasures are superior *also* in kind, and in overall value:

Utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, &c., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency (p. 211).

For the pleasures derived from the higher faculties are ‘preferable *in kind*, apart from the question of intensity’ (p. 213). ‘Intensity’ appears to be conceived by Mill as a quantitative characteristic which is *not* simply equivalent to relative desirability: something like ‘degree of vehemence’. Some pleasures are more disturbing, exciting, ardent or violent than others, but not thereby more agreeable:

It is only those in whom the need of excitement is a disease, that feel the tranquillity which follows excitement dull and insipid, instead of pleasurable in direct proportion to the excitement which preceded it (p. 215).

The admission that mental pleasures may be lower in intensity is obviously not meant to entail that they are *less pleasant*. On the other hand, the claim that they are preferable in kind cannot be meant to entail that they are *more pleasant*. Unless the words ‘in kind’ are otiose, there must be a difference between being preferable in kind and being preferable, full stop. Probably Mill means something like this: to call something preferable in kind to something else is to say or imply that things of the first kind are preferable to things of the second kind, other things being equal. Thus one might say that gold is preferable in kind to silver, meaning that gold is worth more than silver, quantities of each and all other relevant circumstances being the same. Gold is more valuable in itself, though a large quantity of silver may be worth more than a small quantity of gold. Analogously, to say that mental pleasures are preferable in kind to physical pleasures would be to say that pleasures of the mental kind are preferable to pleasures of the physical kind, quantities of each and all other relevant circumstances being the same.

This, of course, already constitutes a denial of the Benthamite slogan, for it entails the proposition ‘Quantity of pleasure being equal, poetry is better than push-pin’. In fact, however, Mill wishes to make the yet stronger claim: that quantity of pleasure being *less*, even then poetry is better than push-pin. Mental pleasures are preferable not only

in kind, but absolutely. In Mill's diary of 1854 there is a draft of the reasoning he was to formulate more elegantly seven years later:

The only true or definite rule of conduct or standard of morality is the greatest happiness, but there is needed first a philosophical estimate of happiness. Quality as well as quantity of happiness is to be considered; less of a higher kind is preferable to more of a lower. The test of quality is the preference given by those who are acquainted with both. Socrates would rather choose to be Socrates dissatisfied than to be a pig satisfied. The pig probably would not, but then the pig knows only one side of the question: Socrates knows both.³²

Questions at once arise. Superior quality might compensate for the low intensity of a particular pleasure, but could it compensate for inferiority in *all* quantitative respects? Mill does not consider, either in the diary or in *Utilitarianism*, whether there could be circumstances in which more of a lower kind of pleasure would be preferable to less of a higher. If one were exceedingly hungry, might one not prefer a pound of plain Cheddar to an ounce of Roquefort—or, for that matter, to a philosophical conversation? But at least it is clear that Monro's Benthamizing account of the difference between higher and lower pleasures would not have been acceptable to Mill.

D. D. Raphael has argued that Mill's own account of the criterion of quality binds him to acknowledge that, contrary to his official thesis, 'the distinction of quality is, at bottom, the same as the distinction of quantity'.³³ Raphael's reasoning runs as follows: the criterion of quality is the preference of competent judges. Now to prefer one thing to another is (Raphael suggests) to desire it more strongly; Mill thinks that to desire something more strongly is to find it more pleasant, so he must think that to prefer something is to find it more pleasant; but being more pleasant is a quantitative difference; therefore (Raphael concludes) Mill's doctrine ought to be that qualitatively superior pleasures are those which, in the opinion of competent judges, are greater in quantity. This neat demonstration relies on the fact that in common usage there is little or no difference between calling something more pleasant and saying that a greater amount of pleasure is to be found in it. But Mill would draw a distinction where common usage does not. He believes that things of certain kinds, even when they give lower quantities of pleasure, have 'a much higher value as pleasures' (p. 211); which seems very close to calling them more pleasant. The claim

³² Diary entry for 23 March 1854; *The Letters of John Stuart Mill*, H. S. R. Elliott (ed.), Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), 381.

³³ 'Fallacies in and about Mill's *Utilitarianism*', *Philosophy* 30 (1955), 354.

is intelligible, even if unconvincing. The fact that there are degrees of hedonic value—that pleasures can be more or less desirable, as they can be more and less in duration or intensity—does not suffice to establish that value falls into the category of quantity. Even if it were conceded that value is a sort of quantity, Mill would insist that it is a very different sort of quantity from duration, intensity, etc., and is not directly proportional to them.

Mill does not point out, as perhaps he should, that pleasures which engage the higher faculties are not necessarily high in value or importance. Vulgar amusements such as gambling or telling jokes demand a modicum of intelligence and imagination, and can be very enjoyable. Even the game of push-pin is a ‘higher’ pleasure, in that only humans are capable of it, and what the players find pleasant is not experiencing the tactile sensations associated with pin-pushing, but using their wits and expertise to defeat their opponents. Higher pleasures may also be depraved or vicious. Only rational beings have the capacity for certain forms of malicious pleasure—gloating over the misfortunes or maltreatment of others, for example. Mill does not suppose that *schadenfreude* and sadism have a higher intrinsic value than harmless physical pleasures such as relaxing in front of the fire; but perhaps he should have explained why not.

A more striking deficiency of Mill’s discussion is that he does not tell us how the grading of *pains* relates to their quality, quantity, etc. Pleasure and pain are supposed to be contraries, and calculations of utility are supposed to be concerned as much with prevention of pain as with promotion of pleasure (cf. pp. 210, 237); so one might have expected Mill to claim that ‘higher’, mental pains are intrinsically more repugnant or disagreeable than ‘lower’, physical pains. People do sometimes say they would rather endure any amount of physical suffering rather than some anguish of the spirit, such as the grief of a bereavement, betrayal by a loved one, extreme humiliation or disgrace, the melancholy that borders on despair. On the other hand, purely intellectual uneasiness—perplexity, uncertainty—is easier to put up with. Mill himself thinks that intellectual dissatisfaction is sometimes *better* than porcine fulfilment. But his short account of the sources of human misery (pp. 216–217) distinguishes physical and mental suffering without giving priority to either kind. The rest of the discussion concentrates on a limited selection of ‘higher’ pleasures and a correspondingly limited selection of ‘lower’ pleasures.

3. The Appeal to Experience

Mill’s appeal to the preference of competent judges is not a form of *a priori* aristocraticism. He links ‘higher pleasures’ with ‘higher faculties’,

but he does not suggest that the superior value of mental pleasures is a logical derivation from the functional superiority of the mental faculties. Rather, he appeals to the ‘feelings and judgment’ of persons who are acquainted with those pleasures. He does say, somewhat misleadingly, that the consensus of preference among competent judges is ‘*what I mean* by difference of quality in pleasures, or *what makes* one pleasure more valuable than another’³⁴—as though qualitative superiority *consisted in* being preferred by an élite class of judges; as though the consensus of preference determined, rather than merely indicated, qualitative differences. If this were so, then the only way any individual judge could discover the quality of his own pleasures would be to ascertain the agreed verdict of all the judges: which is like saying that the only way a citizen can decide how to vote in a parliamentary election is to find out the result of the election. Necessarily, a consensus of preference, like an election result, is a product of and does not ordain the preferences of individual persons. A consensus of opinions regarding the quality of pleasures must rest upon judgments formed by individuals regarding the quality of their own pleasures without reference to the introspective judgments made by others. Each individual’s judgment is based on careful attention to the nature of his own experience; it does not involve consideration of evidence or reference to a criterion. Evidence and criteria are necessary and useful to someone only if he lacks direct access to what the evidence and criteria indicate. Mill would certainly accept this; with the qualification that individual experience requires interpretation, and the interpretation requires to be assessed, confirmed or corrected by reference to the considered judgment of the whole community of subjects of experience. When Mill says that nothing *can* decide questions concerning the quality of pleasures except ‘the feelings and judgment of the experienced’, he intends merely to make the point that the only persons competent to form a comparative judgment are those who are acquainted with the terms of the comparison. In cases of dispute, their verdict is decisive.

This principle is perfectly general in its scope. If the question arose which of a number of lecture halls in a particular university had the greatest seating capacity, the only persons in a position to give a useful answer would be those who knew all the lecture halls involved in the comparison. Similarly, it is usual to employ committees of experienced judges or umpires to assess the merits of participants in certain competitions of skill: between musical performers, for example, and sporting events in which factors such as ‘artistic impression’ are thought important, or in which no specific achievement recognizable by

³⁴ 211; my emphasis.

untrained observers results automatically in the scoring of points. Mill himself applies his principle to the judgment of quantitative as well as qualitative differences among pleasures:

There is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. 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? (p. 213).

Thus, if there were a dispute about whether the pain of toothache is more or less acute than the pain of terminal cancer, or about whether the intensity of the male partner's pleasure in sexual intercourse is or is not diminished by use of a contraceptive sheath, the only way to settle the issue would be to consult people with the relevant experience. Mill might admit, however, that the medical profession is entitled to have an opinion about the intensity of cancer pains, and that a man's regular sexual partner should be able to gauge the relative intensity of his pleasure condom-clad and unencumbered respectively. Mill is not committed to the view that pleasures and pains are totally inaccessible except to the person who has them, or to the view that the process of introspection is infallible. He implies the possibility of sympathetic acquaintance with the feelings of others when he criticizes Bentham for lacking the kind of imagination which is 'the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another'.³⁵ He implies that some people are better than others at attending to and assessing the character of their own pleasures when he says that besides 'opportunities of experience', 'habits of self-consciousness and self-observation' are necessary (p. 214); and in Chapter IV he says that the existence of the link between desire and pleasure can be verified by 'practised self-consciousness and self-observation, assisted by observation of others' (p. 237), and calls these techniques of verification 'sources of evidence', thus implying that none of them is infallible. Mill seems to think that a person could and should revise his estimate of a particular pleasure or pain if he found that people of greater experience and discernment disagreed with him—e.g. if he discovered that older and wiser people did not share his opinion that toothache is the most painful experience in the world; and Mill seems to think also that observation of others can lead someone to make an informed judgment of the quality and quantity of experiences which he himself has never had. With these qualifications, the argument is plainly an appeal to the authority of experience.

³⁵ *Works*, Vol. X, 92.

4. The Verdict

Before the judges can begin considering their verdict, they must enquire what precisely it is that they are being asked to determine. Are they to pronounce upon whether or not mental pleasures are preferable in kind to physical pleasures, preferable outright, or both? And is the comparison to be drawn simply between two kinds of pleasure, or between two modes of life differentiated by the respective kinds of pleasure which function as their dominant ends, or both?

Mill's text is far from clear on these points. He gives the impression of thinking the distinctions unimportant. He moves from one formulation to another, apparently confident that however the terms of the contest are defined, the outcome is not in doubt. This carelessness leads him to claim—or seem to claim—more than is plausible. He appears to think it impossible to nominate a pleasure which is better in itself than some other but not better always and for anyone. He seems reluctant to admit that there can be circumstances in which an intrinsically inferior pleasure is preferable to one which is intrinsically superior. He does say that informed preference, besides being the test of quality, is 'the rule for measuring [quality] against quantity' (p. 214), which suggests he thinks it *possible* for quantity to outweigh quality—why else should we need a 'rule' for measuring them against one another? But the suggestion is countered elsewhere; for example, in his remarks on moral weakness. People do sometimes, he says, prefer lower pleasures to higher, while retaining 'a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher'; but he ascribes all such choices to 'the influence of temptation' and 'infirmity of character' (p. 212). 'It may be questioned', he says,

whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasure, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both (p. 213).

Must every attempt at combining the two kinds of pleasure be ineffectual? Is the right choice *always* of the pleasure which is intrinsically superior? If Mill really intended to say that there is no room in the virtuous life for bodily ease or voluptuous delight, when the joys of exercising the higher faculties are available instead, he might have appealed to the testimony of one or two ambiguous passages in Plato's *Republic* (e.g. 485d, 581e), and perhaps of his own father, the gloomy James Mill, who—so the son wrote in his *Autobiography* (p. 51)—'never varied in rating intellectual enjoyments above all others, even in value as pleasures'. But the majority of other 'competent judges'—

including Aristotle, and Plato too in more circumspect moods³⁶—would deliver a different verdict. So, surely, would common sense.

The thesis that mental pleasures are, without qualification, preferable to physical pleasures ignores the important fact that pleasure, desire and preference are affected by circumstances. What in some circumstances is very agreeable will in other circumstances be much less so. I am not here referring to the fact that people like and dislike different things. It is perfectly true that whether and to what extent one enjoys doing or undergoing something depends on one's particular interests, ambitions, capacities and opinions. But my point is that whether and to what extent a person enjoys doing or undergoing something depends also on when, where, how, under what conditions, with whom, and so on, he does what he does. This principle governs the experience of wise and temperate individuals as much as it does that of the dissolute. Working through a problem in metaphysics may be highly delightful for some people in some circumstances, but not when they are drooping with fatigue. Listening to a symphony by one's favourite composer may be an enjoyable way of passing the time, but the enjoyment is diminished if the performance is bad, or if one is hearing the symphony for the tenth time that day. In some circumstances, physical pleasure is preferred to mental, and rightly. When one is very hungry one would rather tuck into a good meal than read a novel or meditate on the identity of indiscernibles. On the other hand, after one has been munching steadily for a while a different kind of activity begins to make its appeal felt; one begins to take more interest in the conversation than in the cheese. Note that, in these examples, enjoyment waxes or wanes in accordance with changes in the *situation* of the subject, not with changes in his character, tastes, habits or prejudices. I have said nothing to rebut the thesis that there are intersubjectively verifiable facts to be discovered about what is pleasant and what is not. Indeed, the argument as I have stated it presupposes that *for every human being*, the pleasantness of doing or undergoing something is impeded by weariness, over-indulgence, over-familiarity, distracting appetites and so on; though this is a point about the concept of pleasure rather than evidence for the existence of a common human nature.³⁷

The adjectives 'pleasant', 'desirable', etc., may be compared with the somewhat similar adjective 'useful'. A thing is useful in specific ways to

³⁶ Plato's definition of justice in the individual (as the condition in which each element of the soul does and has what is proper to it, and does not interfere with the others) *entails* that physical pleasures have a legitimate place in the constitution of the good life.

³⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 1175a3–9.

specific persons in specific circumstances. The question 'Which is more useful, a pocket-knife or the ability to speak French?' has no definite answer; because pocket-knives and linguistic capacities are utterly different kinds of instrument, each serviceable for an indefinite number of purposes, and the utility of each is relative to the circumstances and purposes of its owner. The ability to speak French will probably be more useful to a resident of Paris, the pocket-knife more useful to a resident of New Guinea, or Robinson Crusoe (even a French Robinson Crusoe) alone on his island. In complete abstraction from circumstances, no instrument is more or less useful than any other. Once a set of circumstances is specified, expressly or tacitly, it may be possible to answer the question which of two instruments is the more useful; but the answer will vary with the specification of the circumstances. Similarly, the question whether or not mental pleasures are preferable to physical pleasures might be capable of determination once a particular context of circumstances is envisaged; but it is possible to envisage circumstances in which the answer to the question would be the opposite of what Mill seems to expect. In general, when physical and mental pleasures are compared, there are circumstances in which the former are pleasanter and more desirable, as well as circumstances in which the reverse is true. In complete abstraction from circumstances, nothing is more or less pleasant and desirable than anything else.

The weaker claim, that mental pleasures are preferable *in kind* to physical pleasures, is not so obviously unwarranted. To be preferable in kind is to be better intrinsically but not necessarily better, full stop. A thing is preferable in kind to something else if things of the first kind are preferable to things of the second kind, other things being equal. The function of the *ceteris paribus* condition is to stipulate the absence of standard causes of variation in preference. Circumstances are assumed to be equally propitious to either term of the comparison. They are assumed to differ in no respect that has any bearing on the determination of relative desirability. Now might it not turn out to be the case that the intrinsic merits of mental pleasures are greater than those of physical pleasures?—i.e. that when quantities of each and all other relevant circumstances are the same, mental pleasures are preferable to physical pleasures?

One difficulty about applying the concept of preferability in kind to pleasures is that the *ceteris paribus* condition may be incapable of fulfilment. If mental pleasures are always *lower* in intensity and always higher in 'permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc.' and no other factors are involved in determining net quantities of pleasure, then there never can exist a quantitative parity between mental pleasures and physical pleasures. Well, perhaps this goes too far. It seems undeniable that some physical pleasures are low in intensity (one can enjoy a swim or a

glass of wine without being *transported* or *convulsed* by the experience), while mental pleasures are sometimes rather intense (for example, the excitement of participating in a debate). Certainly mental *pains* can be intense or acute, etc., and not all physical pains are like that. As for permanency, safety and uncostliness, physical pleasures often bear comparison in these respects with mental pleasures. The pleasure of sexual intercourse is not always more fleeting, more perilous or more expensive than the pleasure of reading philosophical books. An enjoyable evening in London may cost no more, involve as few risks, and last as long, when it is spent in a restaurant rather than in, say, an opera house. In some cases, then, there may be an approximate quantitative parity between mental and physical pleasures, the intrinsic merits of which may then be commensurable. But in many cases it is otherwise. Many mental pleasures *are* low in intensity, while scoring higher than most physical pleasures in other quantitative respects, such as duration. The fact that there is not a parity between the two kinds of pleasure in every single quantitative respect would not matter if there were some way of measuring intensity, say, against duration and other quantities and calculating the total amount of pleasure in each case. But how is this to be done? If the pleasure of sipping brandy is more intense than that of quiet conversation, while the latter is more durable, safer and cheaper, how are we to weigh intensity against the other quantities and calculate the total amount of pleasure in each case? How long must a pleasant conversation continue for the pleasure of it to be equal in quantity to that derived from a glass of brandy?

Even when there is an approximate quantitative parity between two pleasures, and circumstances are equally propitious to both, the person who is—as Mill insists the competent judge must be—‘equally susceptible to both’ kinds of pleasure may be unable to decide between them. Which do you prefer: seeing an excellent performance of an excellent play, or participating in your favourite physical recreation on a fine afternoon? The keen theatregoer who is also a keen athlete will find the question difficult to answer. Perhaps he would prefer to see the play, if this were his only opportunity, or if he were nursing an injured muscle. If he had seen the play the previous evening and were physically fit he might prefer to go out for a run. But the question relates to the *intrinsic* desirability of the respective pleasures: it assumes quantitative parity and equally propitious circumstances for both. The subject’s opportunities, physical conditions, etc., are supposed to be such as not to influence his preference either way. The situation is one in which his inclination is determined solely by the intrinsic merits of the pleasures competing for his election. And in that situation, there might not be enough difference between those merits to move him to a definite preference. He simply likes both very much.

In cases where the subject does consider some particular pleasure to be distinctly superior in kind to some other, still, *qua* competent judge, he remains susceptible to the inferior pleasure; and he may be unwilling to abstain from it completely. Suppose that a person equally susceptible to the pleasures of the mind and the pleasures of the table is asked which he enjoys more: going to dinner in a household where the talk is brilliant and fascinating but the food mediocre, or dining with people who are superb cooks but dull conversationalists. The mental pleasures available in the first household are qualitatively superior to those available in the second, but when it comes to culinary pleasures the situation is reversed. Perhaps our intellectual epicure will judge as Mill expects, declaring that on the whole, and *ceteris paribus*, he enjoys the evenings with clever but ungastronomic companions more than he does the evenings spent gourmandizing with bores. He finds the mental pleasures preferable in kind. Yet he would probably not wish to terminate his visits to the Lucullan establishment even if, by way of exchange, he were permitted to visit the Socratic household as often as he liked. In his judgment, a mode of existence in which he could keep both sets of friends and both kinds of pleasure might be preferable in kind to a mode of existence devoted entirely to one set of friends and the intrinsically superior pleasures to be found in their company. Ideally, perhaps, he would like the Socratics to emulate the culinary standards of the Lucullans. At any rate, we may suppose, he conceives the intrinsically most desirable mode of existence as one which affords him a diversity of pleasures, not the higher pleasures exclusively. Is he then guilty of error, or infirmity of character?

Doubtless Mill is right when he says 'Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures' (p. 211). Apart from the somewhat metaphysical considerations adduced by Mill in support of this claim (our 'sense of dignity', and so forth; p. 212), it is obvious that most of us would be sorry to lose the pleasures of human companionship, conversation and affection, and the many other joys for which non-human animals lack the capacity. But from the fact that no amount of purely physical pleasure could compensate for having to renounce mental pleasures altogether, it does not follow that some amount of purely mental pleasure could compensate for having to renounce physical pleasures altogether. It seems unlikely that many human creatures would consent to be changed into disembodied spirits, given a promise of unlimited opportunities for intellectual activity. Perhaps most of us would prefer (other things being equal) a continuation of our human existence, with improved prospects of both physical and mental pleasures. There are some mental pleasures for which a disembodied spirit would lack the capacity: reading a novel, contemplating the

beauties of nature, the pleasures of human communication and friendship. Mill's hero Socrates, as portrayed in Plato's *Phaedo*, is contemptuous of physical pleasures and worldly attachments; he longs for death and the life of philosophical contemplation that he believes will follow it. But Socrates weights the scales heavily on that side, by supposing the disembodied life to be *endless* and the pleasure of it enhanced by the company of gods and better men than those he knew on earth. Suppose the terms of the competition were set more fairly: suppose one were offered a choice between continuing in the human mode of existence for, say, the next twelve months, with improved access to a diversity of pleasures, both physical and mental, and, on the other hand, living for the next twelve months as a disembodied spirit, equipped with intellect, memory and will and able to reflect and speculate as freely as one wished, but deprived of sensations and emotions and the physical presence of friends. Which mode of existence would seem more desirable? Which would one choose? Surely, even Socrates—that most sociable of philosophers, who professed himself barren of ideas and unable to practise his maieutic art without the company and co-operation of other people—would have opted to stay in the human mode of existence, with its combination of diverse pleasures.

So too would Mill. There is no denying the asceticism of his temperament and the severity of his moral ideal. He maintains consistently that pleasures of 'the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties' have no important part to play in human happiness; that the higher pleasures alone are human pleasures. But Mill's conception of the higher pleasures is less narrowly intellectual than the Socratic conception. Mental pleasures include pleasures 'of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments' (p. 211) as well as of the intellect. The cultivated mind, Mill says, is not necessarily that of a philosopher, 'but any mind to which the foundations of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties', and which has acquired 'a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind'. Such a 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 . . .' (see pp. 215–216). In the *Autobiography* Mill describes how he 'had learnt by experience that the passive susceptibilities needed to be cultivated as well as the active capacities', and come to see that 'the maintenance of a due balance among the faculties' was 'of primary importance' (p. 147). In *Utilitarianism* he reaffirms that happiness requires a plurality of interests and activities. The ultimate end, he says,

is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality . . . not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more of life than it is capable of bestowing (pp. 214, 215).

Despite Mill's refusal to allow passive pleasures anything but a subordinate rôle in the good life, his conception of happiness as a complex of different kinds of pleasure leaves room for the admission that pleasures which are preferable in kind are not always preferable *simpliciter*. And if he were to concede that in some circumstances a purely physical pleasure is more desirable than any mental pleasure, and that there may even be a moral obligation to choose it, he would not *ipso facto* be consenting to a drastic revision of his moral theory.

Mill seems committed, however, to the questionable proposition that everyone or nearly everyone who is acquainted with all the various kinds of pleasure would, upon reflection, agree that the mode of existence most desirable in itself is that in which mental pleasures predominate over physical, and active mental pleasures predominate over passive. Admittedly, Mill never actually says that everyone competent to judge would rate this mode higher than any other. What he actually says is incontestable: that most people would prefer a human existence to a beast's existence, however much more pleasure there might be in the beast's existence; that no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, and so on (p. 211). All these comparisons are between polar extremes, and Mill does not explicitly extend the consensus hypothesis to comparisons between modes of properly human existence, each containing higher pleasures but in different proportions. It is pretty clear, however, that Mill intends the hypothesis to be thus extended. He admits no exceptions to his principle that 'a being of higher faculties . . . can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence' (p. 212); and I think he is convinced that the majority of those who know the higher pleasures fully and at first hand would agree that (assuming adequate provision for our basic physical and emotional needs) the more of such pleasures we have in our lives the happier we shall be. But surely Mill's vision of the good life is too lofty and austere to commend itself to every human being. Many people would prefer an existence with a higher proportion of physical pleasures, active and passive, and a higher proportion of passive mental pleasures, than Mill would regard as ideal. Not all such persons are beasts, fools, dunces or scallywags.

They may be decent, intelligent human beings, not lacking in moral virtues, capable of enjoying the occasional exercise of their higher faculties in theoretical speculation, in mastering and practising arts and skills, in political activity, etc., but who nevertheless have no desire for heroic virtue, and who wish to participate in the higher pleasures only from time to time, not to dedicate their lives to them. Must they have misjudged their own capacities of enjoyment?

Perhaps not. Mill's thesis is that a mode of existence with a high proportion of active mental pleasures is the best *in itself*; not that it would necessarily be the most rewarding for anyone with a bare inkling of what is involved in it. For many such people it would not be feasible, and if they attempted it they would find it less pleasant than some other mode of existence more suited to their characters and abilities. Whether and to what extent people enjoy their lives depends on whether and to what extent their opportunities are congruent with their innate and acquired needs, dispositions, interests, capacities and expectations. A person with modest aptitudes, needs and expectations may enjoy life very much provided he gets the opportunity to develop and use his aptitudes and satisfy his needs and expectations. He may lead the best and pleasantest life of which he is capable. Certainly, Mill would say, his is not the kind of life which is best and pleasantest in itself. A person of superior talents who, in the same way, was enabled by circumstances to develop, extend and exercise his superior talents to the full would have a pleasanter and better life. The mode of existence that is best in itself is the mode which would be most congenial to the best-endowed, highest-developed, morally and intellectually most advanced human beings. But few fall into that category; and no one is in a position to choose his mode of existence in the absolute manner of a Platonic soul at the Spindle of Necessity, determining in advance what shall be his own heredity, his innate potentialities and inclinations, and the circumstances that shape the course of his earthly existence. These things are largely given, beyond our control. We are born into a particular set of circumstances, in possession of a limited equipment of latent powers, and we have to make the best of what may be rather a bad situation. What would be best in ideal circumstances for a supremely gifted individual would be undesirable and inappropriate for someone of meagre or mediocre ability living in poor circumstances. In the essay *On Liberty* Mill writes:

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 a 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 (*Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 270).

This is the central theme of *On Liberty*, whereon I base my reading of Mill's intention in *Utilitarianism*.³⁸ The system of social arrangements that is best in itself is one in which all varieties of human nature—the weak as well as the strong, the deviant as well as the normal, the less as well as the more worthy—are, so far as possible, enabled and encouraged to develop to full maturity, and enjoy their respective proper kinds and degrees of happiness.

Mill's thesis about the mode of existence that is best in itself might be reformulated like this: in the common opinion of those with the relevant experience, the pleasantness of human existence is proportional to the quality and level of development of the individual's inborn potentialities and dispositions. The greater his natural gifts, the greater his capacity for both happiness and unhappiness. Without opportunity and will to extend and exercise the higher faculties, life is less enjoyable than it could be. Other things being equal, a person whose aptitudes of intellect and temperament have been nurtured, refined and perfected by education and experience will find his life to be the more rewarding and worthwhile the more he *practises* the virtues of mind and character which he has acquired. The further he falls short of doing the best he is capable of, the further he falls short of happiness.

But does Mill's appeal to the common opinion of those with relevant experience boil down to anything more than the trivial observation that people who embrace, become accustomed to and voluntarily persevere in a certain way of life would not wish to exchange it for some other? Certainly, people devote themselves to what they think is worthy of devotion, they prefer what they find pleasant; but nothing follows from that. Maybe someone enjoys his life, maybe not; but how can he

³⁸ In my book *Freedom and Liberation* (London: Harvester, 1976) I argued that *On Liberty* expounds a Romantic form of libertarianism inconsistent with Mill's utilitarian principles. I still believe this; but on one important point I think I misinterpreted Mill. Referring to his assertion that the individual's 'own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode' (Vol. XVIII, 270), I commented: 'Presumably the mode that is "best in itself" is the one that corresponds with the principle of utility, and the mode that is best simpliciter is the one that corresponds with the individual's desires' (*Freedom and Liberation*, 87). I have come to see that by 'best in itself' Mill means something like 'best in kind', and he is making a point which is quite compatible with his utilitarianism: that happiness is better promoted by allowing the individual to choose his own mode of existence than by forcing him into one which, though more excellent in itself, is unsuitable and impracticable for him.

measure the desirability of other ways of life, which he has never experienced? Alan Ryan offers a jaunty statement of this difficulty:

No one has ever cared much for Mill's . . . argument that our belief in the superiority of Socrates' pleasures to the fool's rests on the fact that Socrates knows both sorts of happiness and the fool only one. The philosopher who is a half-hearted sensualist cannot estimate the attractions of a debauched existence, any more than the sensualist flicking through the pages of Hume can estimate the pleasures of philosophy.³⁹

But surely one can assess the merits of a way of life without first-hand experience of it, so long as one has adequate knowledge of its constituent parts and of the experience of other persons who have followed it. I have not lived as a coolie in Calcutta, and may not comprehend fully how dreadful such a mode of existence can be; but I have undergone some, albeit lesser, forms and degrees of distress, humiliation and hunger, and I am sufficiently informed about the conditions under which coolies in Calcutta have to live to be confident that my mode of existence is more agreeable than theirs. Karl Marx could see that the life of the urban proletariat in nineteenth-century England was miserable and degraded, without himself attempting to live as a member of that class. Socrates was not disqualified from judging the quality of the apolaustic life by the fact that he never tried it experimentally; for he had a continuing acquaintance with the pleasures which are its preponderant elements, and with Alcibiades and others who pursued it. Moreover, Socrates was able to compare different sections of his own experience, and verify that periods when bodily necessity or the obligations of civilized life required him to abstain from the use of his higher faculties and indulge instead in lower pleasures were, other things being equal, less memorable, less enjoyable periods than those when he was free to philosophize with his chosen companions.

This analogical reasoning might work also in reverse. Someone who is unequipped for the pleasures which require long intellectual discipline or fidelity to the moral virtues might be able to gain some conception of their nature and some appreciation of their worth, might even be moved to covet them, by observing and reflecting on their manifestations in the lives and conduct of others. A former British Prime Minister said a few years ago that his greatest regret was that he never had the chance of university education, which he believed would have led him into wonderful new realms of experience and understanding. Alcibiades, in the *Symposium*, confesses that the discourses of Socrates enchanted him and made him ashamed of and discontented

³⁹ J. S. Mill (London: Routledge, 1974), 111.

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with his own life, which no other person was able to do (215cd, 216ab): 'I saw in him godlike, golden images of such astonishing beauty that I was ready to do whatever he commanded' (216e). Mill himself points out that self-indulgence may co-exist with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of temperance (p. 212); and this appreciation must involve some kind of sympathetic participation in the experience of temperate persons. Mill says in the Notes on Plato's *Gorgias* that the attraction of virtue is felt not through the intellect, but through the imagination and affections:

The love of virtue, and every other noble feeling, is not communicated by reasoning, but caught by inspiration or sympathy from those who already have it; and its nurse and foster-mother is Admiration. We acquire it from those whom we earliest love and reverence; from our ideal of those, whether in past or in present times, whose lives and characters have been the mirror of all noble qualities; and lastly, from those who, as poets or artists, can clothe those feelings in the most beautiful forms, and breathe them into us through our imagination and our sensations (*Works*, Vol. XI, p. 150).

The appeal to experience in the second chapter of *Utilitarianism* gains in subtlety and persuasive power when this is allowed to qualify it. Moreover, the appearance of élitism in Mill's theory is mitigated. Persons who excel in the moral and intellectual virtues may enjoy more direct experience and fuller understanding of the greatest goods in human life; but their formal testimony about such matters is not the epistemic foundation of other people's value judgments.

University of Sussex