

## MILL ON QUALITY AND QUANTITY

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*A well known paragraph in Mill's 'Utilitarianism' has standardly been misread. Mill does not claim that if some pleasure is of 'higher quality', then it will be (or ought to be) chosen over the pleasure of lower quality regardless of their respective quantities. Instead he says that if some pleasure will be chosen over another available in larger quantity, then we are justified in saying that the pleasure so chosen is of higher quality than the other. This assertion is unproblematic.*

1. An influential view in the literature on Mill's *Utilitarianism* is that Mill held that 'quality' outweighs 'quantity' of pleasure(s). According to this 'standard' view, a 'higher' pleasure always will be or ought to be chosen over a 'lower' one – even when the latter is 'available in a larger quantity'.<sup>1</sup> I shall argue that this view relies on a mistaken reading of the short passage from which it claims to derive support.

In para. 5 of ch. 2 of *Utilitarianism*, Mill writes

If one of the two [pleasures] is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, [then] we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far out-weighting quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.<sup>2</sup>

This paragraph, however, does not warrant the conclusion that Mill thought that considerations about the quality of a pleasure *automatically* outweigh considerations about the quantity in which it is available (though sometimes of course they might).

<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g., 'Mill thinks that the higher activities have value that is infinitely or lexically greater than that of mere pleasures, because he claims that their value cannot be outweighed by any quantity of lower pleasures', D. Brink, 'Mill's Deliberative Utilitarianism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 21 (1992), pp. 67–103, at p. 92; '[for Mill] one unit of a higher kind is preferable to any finite number of a lower kind', J. Riley, 'On Quantities and Qualities of Pleasure', *Utilitas*, 5 (1993), pp. 291–300, at p. 293; similarly Riley, 'Is Qualitative Hedonism Incoherent?', *Utilitas*, 11 (1999), pp. 347–58, at p. 351; cf. G. Scarre: 'Donner and Riley on Qualitative Hedonism', *Utilitas*, 9 (1997), pp. 351–60; 'Mill's claim, then, is that some pleasures are so valuable that they will be preferred, by those who have experienced both, to any amount of certain other pleasures', R. Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London, Routledge, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861), in *Collected Works*, ed. J. Robson (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969), Vol. x, p. 211.

Making the logic of this passage somewhat more explicit, Mill is usually read as saying that

1. If some pleasure is of higher quality, then it will be or ought to be chosen over the pleasure of lower quality regardless of their respective quantities.

But Mill, I claim, is clearly affirming the *converse* of this:

2. *If* some pleasure will be chosen over another available in larger quantity, *then* we are *justified in saying* that the pleasure so chosen is of higher quality than the other.

The standard view is based on the simple mistake of reading the conditional back to front. What has commonly been taken to be the consequent is really the antecedent.

Rather than making an assertion about the *metaphysics* of pleasures and their relations, this statement should more plausibly be read as forming part of Mill's *epistemological* digression into how to *tell* which pleasures may be considered of 'higher quality': 'Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure'. This 'decided preference' is what the controversial passage illustrates, which immediately follows the text just quoted and completes the paragraph.

2. Mill's method is entirely plausible if read in this way, as the following analogy might illustrate. Suppose you wanted to derive a conclusion about the relative quality of two wines from the choice (rather than, say, the proclamations) of experts. The experts prefer high quality wine to low quality wine, and more of either to less, other things being equal. It can further be assumed that in the right conditions the experts' choices will reflect these preferences.

So if between two bottles of wines *X* and *Y* that do not differ in volume the experts choose wine *X*, we have reason to believe that it is of higher quality. To appeal to wine *X*'s higher quality is the most natural way of explaining the choice, as by assumption all other things are equal. However, if there is more of the low quality wine *Y* the experts might also choose that – provided they believe the gain in overall quantity to offset the lower quality of the wine. Thus if there is more of some wine than of the other, and an expert chooses the wine available in *larger* quantity, not much definite information as to the wines' relative quality is conveyed.

More generally, under what conditions does an expert's choice convey with certainty that wine *X* is of higher quality than wine *Y*? Clearly this will be so when (a) the two forces of quality and quantity pull in different directions, and (b) wine *Y* is at least as abundant as wine *X*. In other words, if the expert rejects some quantity of wine *Y* in favour of a *smaller* quantity of wine *X*, then we can be as certain as this methodology allows that wine *X* is of higher quality than wine *Y*. And the larger the quantity of wine *Y* that would be rejected, the higher must be the quality of wine *X*. Indeed, in the special case in which the expert thinks that *any* quantity of wine *Y* any person can safely enjoy is not enough to compensate for, say, just one glass of wine *X*, then we can be certain that wine *X* must be *far superior* in quality. Sometimes

considerations of quantity apparently become almost negligible, so that the qualitative superiority may be assumed to be all-important. Concerning pleasures in general, this is just what Mill is talking about.

3. This textual analysis does not attempt to resolve all of the issues concerning Mill's quality/quantity distinction that one might want to raise. In particular, even though we are given a clear criterion under what conditions we would be *justified* in 'ascribing' higher quality to some pleasure, this passage does not tell us what Mill thought would correspond to the concept of 'quality'. Nor do we know how to tell who *is* an expert in the real world, since ultimately it is not clear what is required for someone to be 'competently acquainted' with a pleasure.

Yet given Mill's assertion that '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' (my italics), maybe it would also be absurd to believe that *these* questions should be any easier to answer concerning pleasures than concerning, for instance, wine.<sup>3</sup>

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