

## **J.S. Mill's Notion of Qualitative Superiority of Pleasure: A Reappraisal**

**Madhumita Mitra, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy**

**Vidyasagar College, Calcutta University, Kolkata, India**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, an attempt has been made to provide an account of Mill's notion of qualitative superiority of pleasure. My humble intention is to clear up certain misunderstandings that I have noticed to occur from his notion of qualitative difference between pleasures. There has been impression among some of the readers that giving emphasis upon pleasures of reading poetry over food, Mill has represented himself as an apostle of intellectual class and has ignored one of the crucial aspects of human life i.e., its physical aspect. But it would be wrong to interpret Mill's view in this light. For Mill, nature of the factors (mental/physical/both), causing pleasurable experience has no necessary connection with pleasure's quality. What actually makes a pleasure qualitatively superior is how it has been experienced, considerately or inconsiderately.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to provide an account of Mill's notion of qualitative superiority of pleasure. Question might arise: Why venture into such an age-old issue? My humble intention is to clear up certain misunderstandings that I have noticed to occur from his notion of qualitative difference between pleasures.

In the essay *Utilitarianism*, Mill has distinguished between pleasures on the basis of quality saying that a given pleasure is considered to be qualitatively superior, if it appeals to man's higher faculties. Mill's appeal to higher faculties has led most of the readers to think that he has given emphasis upon intellectual pleasure over sensuous pleasure. This is true indeed! Mill has made a very important distinction between pleasures of reading poetry and that of eating food. But, the question is: in what sense? There has been impression among some of the readers that giving emphasis upon pleasures of reading poetry over food, Mill has represented himself as an apostle of intellectual class and has ignored one of the crucial aspects of human life i.e., its physical aspect. But it would be wrong to interpret Mill's view in this

light. We note that Mill's notion of qualitative superiority of pleasure instead of having an appeal to a restricted class has rather a universal appeal to people across generations.

If Mill's emphasis upon pleasure of reading poetry is understood in terms of his emphasis upon intellectual pleasure denying physical pleasure then his stance is very likely to receive hard criticisms from the quarter of common people. Questions would arise, how can an embodied individual survive ignoring physical pleasure? Is it not natural for an embodied individual to take pleasure in eating, drinking and having sex? Moreover, there are many people who do not have access to pleasures of reading poetry and literature. After, hard physical labour throughout the day what they do wish to experience is pleasures of physical comfort. Pleasures of eating, drinking and physical rest are considered by them as extremely essential for their good mental and physical health. Would Mill undermine value of their pleasures? Obviously, he would not! Mill has nowhere, in his writings, asked us to lead a rigorous life rejecting our instinctive and natural pleasure. But, then we need to understand the significance of Mill's preference for pleasure of reading poetry over that of eating food.

Mill, unlike his utilitarian predecessor Bentham, believes that a mere pleasurable experience is not valuable in itself. All kinds of pleasurable experience being mental by definition, it is 'quality' which can actually distinguish between them. Mill's several writings indicate that 'quality' of a pleasurable experience, depends on the nature of faculty exercised in enjoying pleasure. Any pleasure is considered to be higher in quality if it is enjoyed by applying higher faculty and lower in quality, if it has been enjoyed by applying lower faculty. In the essay *Utilitarianism*, Mill has recognized faculties of intellect, imagination, feeling and moral sentiments as higher faculties and sensuous faculty as lower faculty. But why for Mill, the nature of faculty, exercised in enjoying pleasure, is so important?

We should always keep in mind that being a utilitarian, Mill's aim has been to achieve the general well-being of the society, instead of confining his aim only at the individual well-being. By general well-being, Mill implies well-being of the greatest number of individuals where well-being of each individual would be in harmony, without obstructing each other. In his eye, both general and individual well-being is so interconnected that the former cannot be attained in abstraction from the latter. In Mill's opinion, individual well-being can be achieved only when each individual has worked out his emotional, artistic, intellectual, moral and spiritual transformation through cultivation of his higher faculties. In **On Liberty**, he has frequently urged that only when an individual exercises his observation, reasoning and judgment in whatever he does instead of blindly following customs and tradition or being guided by others, he can

develop from within. The worth of a human being lies in employing his all distinctive human faculties in making a choice, such as “observation to see”, “reasoning and judgment to foresee”, “activity to gather material for decision”, “discrimination to decide”, and when he has decided, “firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision”. In Mill’s opinion, even if an individual is guided in some good path, by applying “ape-like faculty of imitation” and hence, does not feel the necessity of exercising his distinctive human endowments, his unreflective action would actually lessen his worth as a human being. In Mill’s words, “It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it.”(OL.III.4). In the essay **On Liberty**, Mill has significantly noted that only a person with self-developed individuality can work for the development of others. As he writes, “In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others. There is a greater fullness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them.” (OL, 266) Mill’s statements imply that the goal of utilitarian morality can be achieved only through cultivation of higher faculty by a self-developed individual. Cultivation of sensuous faculty fails to achieve this goal because such faculty being by and large blind, impulsive and unreflective in nature can neither bring desired transformation within the individual and consequently, nor in the society. To achieve any positive transformation, sensuous nature of individuals must be guided by their higher faculties. The nature of faculty, exercised in enjoying pleasure, hence, is important for Mill because of the effects the use of these faculties generates upon individual life in particular and the social life in general.

The significance of Mill’s emphasis upon pleasures of reading poetry and literature over that of eating food can, therefore, be understood in the light of his utilitarian concern. He notes that reading poetry and literature can help us to develop from within acting upon our character and by effecting our inner growth it can also facilitate the growth of others around us. Mill’s own experience has actually motivated him for such preference. From Mill’s Autobiography we come to know that during his ‘mental crisis’, reading of Wordsworth’s poetry has helped him to recover from the crisis. In a review article on Alfred Tennyson’s early poems, he writes: “the noblest end of poetry as an intellectual pursuit, [is] that of acting upon desires and characters of mankind through their emotions, to raise them towards the perfection of their nature.”<sup>1</sup> In *Civilization*, Mill writes: “the mission of the literature should be as an enlightener and improver of the sentiments.”<sup>2</sup> This implies that mere enjoyment of reading poetry and literature has less value than the pleasure of inner growth experienced through reading of literature and poetry. However, emphasizing upon intellectual pleasure, Mill has not meant to abandon the value of instinctive or natural physical pleasures in our life, outright. Actually, out of utilitarian concern he has assigned less value to

physical pleasures, having noted their inability to effect the growth of the individual as well as social mind.

Mill's qualitative distinction between pleasures as ensuing from the exercise of higher and lower faculties can, therefore, be appropriately understood in terms of the distinction between pleasurable experience derived from exercising reason, judgment and self-control on the one hand and pleasurable experience derived from acting blindly or impulsively, on the other. To be more precise, the qualitative difference can be understood in terms of the distinction between pleasures of a reflective mind and that of an unreflective mind. A reflective mind can take into consideration well-being of an individual in connection with the well-being of society, whereas an unreflective mind cannot. The distinction can also be understood in terms of the distinction between pleasurable experience of exercising individuality and pleasurable experience of remaining passive. In '**Utilitarianism**' also Mill has argued in this line while giving preference to Socratic life over fool's life. In the essay, he has argued that it is always better to lead a *dissatisfying Socratic life* rather than a *satisfied fool's life* and in urging so, he has actually emphasized upon leading a *life of individuality* over a *life of passivity*.

In the light of ongoing discussion, as it seems, any explanation of Mill's qualitative distinction between pleasures merely in terms of the distinction between mental or intellectual pleasure on the one hand and bodily or sensuous pleasure, on the other, would be rather inappropriate. First of all, all pleasures being mental by definition, we cannot meaningfully categorize pleasures in terms of mental and physical. Pleasures can be fairly categorized in terms of the factors causing them. Sometimes our pleasure can be caused by mental factors, such as my feeling of love, sympathy, success, honour, trust, courage etc. Sometimes, it can be caused by physical factors such as eating delicious food, cold dip in horrific summer, sexual intercourse etc, and sometimes by both the factors combined together. Mill has argued in this line in his *A System of Logic*. He argues that since all pleasures are "feelings" and "feelings" signify only conscious states, hence all pleasures are only conscious states. All pleasures being conscious states of a sentient being: nothing can be a pleasure, unless it has been experienced by a mind. Therefore, just as there is no genuine philosophical distinction between mental and bodily feelings (vii, 52-53), the common distinction between mental and bodily pleasures is without any foundation and can be applied meaningfully only to the *antecedent causes* of pleasures. Mill's qualitative distinction is, however, free from this philosophical meaninglessness. However, though Mill has acknowledged distinction between pleasure of a human being and that of an animal in terms of their *sources* of enjoying pleasure, what does actually matter for his qualitative distinction is not the nature of *antecedent* factors causing pleasure but

how pleasure has been experienced. Mental pleasures do not become qualitatively superior simply on the ground of being caused by mental factors; neither do physical pleasures become inferior simply on the ground of being caused by physical factors. The qualitative superiority or inferiority of a pleasurable experience is decided upon depending on its contribution to individual and social well-being. In the essay *Utilitarianism*, we can notice that Mill has acknowledged qualitative difference not only between mental and bodily pleasures but also between two bodily pleasures. He urges that pleasure derived from uncontrolled sensual indulgences should be considered as qualitatively inferior to the pleasure derived from controlled sensual indulgence (U.II.7). This is because former pleasure causes injury to health whereas latter pleasure preserves our good health. Some of Mill's comments in *On Liberty* also suggest that Mill has not condemned any sensuous pleasure merely on the ground that it is sensuous by nature. He is actually of the opinion that sensuous pleasure should be pursued with caution, without harming the legitimate interest of others. In the essay, he has approved enjoyment by a drunkard of his drunken mood as long as he performs his duties to others. Mill, of course, would never consider such pleasure as an elevating one, but in comparison to the harmful enjoyment of drunken mood, he would prefer harmless enjoyment of such mood. Following Mill's view, likewise, a qualitative distinction can also be made between two sorts of mental pleasures e.g., between habitual enjoyment of reading poetry and pleasure of inner growth experienced through reading poetry.

Our reading of *On Liberty* along with *Utilitarianism*, hence, notes that Mill's notion of qualitatively superior pleasure has a utilitarian dimension and that lies in generating greater well-being, taking care of the well-being of one's inner self as well as legitimate interests of others. This point can be properly clarified in the light of his distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding action in *On Liberty*. So far as an individual's self-regarding action is concerned, he is sovereign over his mind and body. No one can justifiably interfere with his self-regarding action. On the other hand, other-regarding actions are such over which an individual has no freedom. An individual is free to perform other-regarding actions as long as his action does not 'harm' the legitimate interest of others. Since enjoyment of pleasure is a kind of activity, a distinction can be made also between self-regarding and other-regarding pleasure. We can take as examples of self-regarding pleasure- one's enjoyment of reading poetry, literature, listening music, eating, drinking etc. Now, self-regarding pleasure can be enjoyed by employing either higher faculties or lower faculties. Some self-regarding pleasures can lead to development of one's well-being whereas some do not. Our pleasures of reading poetry and literature can differ qualitatively. For example, habitual enjoyment of reading bad poetry and literature differs qualitatively from the pleasure of enriching inner self from reading good poetry and literature. Likewise, there can be qualitative difference between

pleasures of eating food- e.g., pleasure of eating enjoyed by a hungry person and pleasure of eating enjoyed by a glutton. Here, pleasurable experience of the former kind has a sign of self-control whereas the latter kind has not. Excessive enjoyment of eating and drinking may lead to injury of one's health; whereas enjoyment of food keeping in view one's physical necessity provides nourishment to the enjoyer's health. Hence, irrespective of the nature of factors causing pleasure –physical or mental or both the factors combined together – qualitative superiority of a self-regarding pleasure takes into consideration enjoyer's exercise of reasoning, judgment and self-control in enjoying the pleasure. For Mill, like other-regarding actions, other-regarding pleasures would be those which have either an adverse or positive effect on others legitimate interest. Examples of other-regarding pleasure can be of following types:

- 1) Passing my days deriving pleasure from reading poetry and literature while situation demands me to take care of my ill and aged parents.
- 2) Enjoying pleasure of eating alone, depriving my hungry family members.
- 3) Deriving sexual pleasure from my partner forcefully against his/ her consent instead of enjoying the pleasure with my partner's lovable consent.

In all the three above-mentioned examples, pleasure has been enjoyed without applying reasoning, judgment and self-control. Consequently, such pleasures are bound to harm the legitimate interest of the person to whom we are obligated. In the first example, I have enjoyed pleasure of intellect ignoring my obligation to my ill and aged parents. In the second example, I have enjoyed sensuous pleasure ignoring my obligation to my family members. In the third example, again, while enjoying pleasure, I have ignored my obligation to my partner. Mill would consider each one of the above-mentioned cases as examples of qualitatively inferior pleasure. Truly speaking, Mill as an embodied human being can never undermine value of the pleasure of hunger satisfaction and that of sexual intercourse by another embodied human being. In these cases what would be qualitatively inferior for him is the pleasure of eating like a glutton depriving others and taking pleasure in illegitimate physical indulgence etc. Mill is right in his perspective! Undeniably, an individual, who is constantly indulging himself in the pursuit of his selfish pleasure, cannot contribute to the well-being of the society by affecting his inner well-being. If Mill considers pleasure of reading poetry in itself as valuable irrespective of its contribution to the well-being, he would fail to be designated as a utilitarian.

## Conclusion

To conclude, for Mill, the nature of factors (mental/physical/both), causing pleasurable experience has no necessary connection with pleasure's quality. What actually makes a pleasure qualitatively superior is *how it has been experienced, considerately or inconsiderately*. By saying "considerately", here, we want to mean taking into consideration one's inner well-being as well as social well-being. Mill has emphasized upon reflective enjoyment of pleasure because primarily being a utilitarian, *the greatest utility of the greatest number* has always been his chief concern. He has tried to provide an account of his utilitarianism by assigning pleasure a place so central to its tenet because he has been under the impression that the greatest good can be achieved not by neglecting people's natural desire (i.e., desire for pleasure) but by improving upon it. Mill, as a utilitarian, has not been in favour of enjoying any kind of pleasure that has the possibility of endangering social welfare. He thinks that only when pleasures are enjoyed keeping in view one's inner well-being as well as well-being of others, the greatest utility can be attained and only such pleasures can claim to have qualitative superiority.

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## References:

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Email: [jmitam.mitra@gmail.com](mailto:jmitam.mitra@gmail.com)