

MILL AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The spirit of Mill's philosophy is, first and foremost, one of naturalism. For the purposes here, we can understand the basic thrust of Mill's naturalism as a commitment to two connected claims. Firstly, that man is wholly part of nature: humans are objects broadly continuous with other simpler objects which we encounter in experience and which are subject to natural laws. Secondly, all of our knowledge of the world must come through empirical observation: there can, in effect, be no substantial knowledge that is gained *a priori*. The claims are distinct, but clearly related. The guiding thought is that if man is merely a part of nature, no transmission of information about some part of nature can occur *except* by causal chains leading from those external events to ourselves – which is to say by way of sense perception.¹

Mill's commitment to naturalism makes him an invigorating philosophic companion for twenty-first century readers – but we should not lose sight of the historical context in which he wrote. Mill was the most influential English-language philosopher of the nineteenth century, and his work in epistemology, metaphysics, political theory, and moral philosophy reflects characteristically nineteenth-century concerns. The period in which Mill's general outlook was crystallised was one asking searching questions about how to move beyond the legacy of the European Enlightenment, and how to respond to the rise of democratic social structures. Much of Mill's moral philosophy, which shall be the focus of this chapter, can be seen to engage with these issues.

To the generation active in the early nineteenth century, Enlightenment optimism had been significantly tempered by the chaos of post-Revolutionary France. The breakdown of traditional modes of authority seemed to usher in an age of individualism and materialism, corrosive of

¹ See Skorupski 1998 for discussion of the relation of Mill's naturalism to the various aspects of his philosophy.

any meaningful ethical life. A ready explanation was offered. The Enlightenment had been committed to the unrestricted use of free critique: no doctrine was sacrosanct, and every principle was asked to justify itself on the basis on evidence. This thoroughgoing commitment to criticism, however, seemed to undermine the possibility of any agreement upon or attachment to substantive moral doctrines, ending in a sceptical reliance of each individual on his own preference. The Enlightenment was, in this sense, seen as a *negative* moment, in need of supplementation.

Mill shares this view: the eighteenth century is characterised by him as an age which is dominated by thinkers who saw 'what was not true, not what was'. 'To tear away, was indeed all that these philosophers, for the most part, aimed at: they had no conception that anything else was needful.'² The problem for the nineteenth century was how to fill the void left by the Enlightenment and overcome scepticism without reverting to dogmatism. As Frederick Beiser puts it: 'how is it possible to educate the public about the principles of morality, politics, and taste when reason casts nothing but doubt upon them?'3

This anxiety is deeply connected to the issues of alienation and disenchantment that came sharply into focus during the period. During the famous 'mental crisis', Mill felt closely the disaffection that could be caused by seeing oneself as a manufactured individual of the modern era. Mill's extraordinary education by his father and Bentham in preparation for leadership of the philosophical radicals had left him unable to feel and identify with goals not properly his *own*. To Mill, as to many during the early period of the nineteenth century, the modern world seemed to threaten to mechanise the individual, to make him passive in the process of having his desires determined by forces beyond his control. The question of how the individual could feel at home in an artificial world loomed large.

These are romantic questions, and Mill engaged seriously with the answers the romantics offered. Romanticism has often been characterised in philosophy as an attempt to in some sense reverse the Enlightenment – as a retreat from reason towards aestheticism, irrationalism or mysticism.⁴ If it were only this, Mill would have had little time for thinkers such as Wordsworth,

² Mill, *Coleridge*, 10: 131–2, 139. References to Mill are taken from 1963–1991, citing volume and page. See also Mill, *Bentham*, 10: 80, Mill, *Spirit of the Age*, 22: 230–3.

³ Beiser 2003: 47.

⁴ See, for example, Berlin 2000 for an account of romanticism as a 'violent onslaught upon the premises of the Enlightenment' (p. 7).

Coleridge, Carlyle, and Goethe, whom he held in high esteem.⁵ In fact, the romantics sought not to dethrone reason, but rather to stress the use of the imagination in the discovery, teaching, and sustaining of truth. Recent scholarship has stressed the broad continuity between the objectives of the Enlightenment and romantic periods. 'If the romantics were the critics of the *Aufklärung*, they were also its disciples', Beiser notes.⁶

The romantics sought to steady the powers of reason by deepening the input of the imagination in supporting ethical ideals, and to show that man need not be seen as a passive recipient of desires and opinions, but could attain a degree of autonomy over his character. Mill's work reflects this influence, being infused with nineteenth-century desire for active engagement with the world, spontaneity of character and self-direction, and the full development of man in all his faculties. He did not, however, agree with the philosophic premises of the romantics. Often, these were post-Kantian in orientation, and this was an aspect of romanticism he could never accept.

The empiricists of the eighteenth century were correct in their philosophical starting point, but their boyish enthusiasm for progress led them to overlook the genuine problems modernity presented.⁷ The romantic tradition understood these issues all too well, grappled with some of the deepest issues of ethical life in a profound and imaginative way, but was intellectually undisciplined. Both sides in the 'fight between the nineteenth century and the eighteenth' had seen 'one side of the truth'.⁸ '[W]hoever could master the premises and combine the methods of both, would possess the entire English philosophy of their age.'⁹ This, then, was Mill's project: to integrate nineteenth-century insights and aspirations into the philosophical framework of naturalism. He expresses this well when claiming that 'out of my mechanical premises, I elicit *dynamical* conclusions'.¹⁰

⁵ I name only four of the most prominent romantics cited in the *Autobiography* (see Mill, *Autobiography* 1: 149ff). Mill also knew works of other key thinkers of the romantic period, however. See Macleod 2011: 1–6.

⁶ Beiser 2003: 44.

⁷ 'Boyish' is in fact Mill's term. Mill describes Bentham thus: 'He knew no dejection, no heaviness of heart. He never felt life a sore and a weary burthen. He was a boy to the last' (Mill, *Bentham*, 10: 92). The claim that the eighteenth century was characterised by an innocence to the coming effects of modernisation was of course popular sentiment. 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven!' (Wordsworth 1970: 196).

⁸ Mill, *Autobiography*, 1: 169–71. ⁹ Mill, *Coleridge*, 10: 121.

¹⁰ Mill, Letter to Carlyle, 12: 181.

HIGHER PLEASURES AND FREEDOM

Bentham's theory of value is hedonistic, holding that the only ultimate bearers of value are occurrences of pleasure, and that the only ultimate bearers of disvalue are occurrences of pain. His theory, moreover, assumes that instances of value are well ordered, and in a manner that maps directly on to quantity of pleasure. Pleasure, that is to say, comes in various quantities, and more pleasure is always to be preferred to less.

All that matters in terms of value, according to this theory, is the *amount* of pleasure generated: 'quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry'.¹¹ The *type* of pleasure experienced, for Bentham, was of no matter. Many critics had found this characterisation of value objectionable, implying that the goal of life was a mundane state of satisfaction.

[S]uch a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure – no better and nobler object of pursuit – they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine[.]¹²

Such a conception of value was said to 'represent human nature in a degrading light',¹³ and confirmed the suspicion of many nineteenth-century thinkers that modern social structures bred mediocrity and undermined the possibility of high ideals. Mill had sympathy for these criticisms. His solution, however, was to point out that this was not a result of treating pleasure as the sole bearer of value. Rather, the problem lay in Bentham's assumption that ordering of values takes place solely on the basis of quantity of pleasure generated. 'It would be absurd', Mill writes, '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'.¹⁴

Mill rejects the claim that value correlates to quantity of pleasure, and that such a simple algorithmic decision procedure can specify which states of affairs are most valuable. Instead, Mill claims that some experiences are more valuable on the basis that the pleasure involved is of a higher quality.

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have

¹¹ Mill, *Bentham*, 10: 113. ¹² Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 210. ¹³ Ibid. ¹⁴ Ibid., 211.

experience of both give a decided preference [...] that is the more desirable pleasure.¹⁵

This claim is a purely formal one about value ordering – that there can exist pleasures p_h and p_l , such that p_h is more valuable than p_l , even where p_l is present in an equal or greater quantity. Some commentators have claimed that Mill holds that *any* quantity of a higher pleasure is more valuable than *any* quantity of a lower pleasure on the basis of the following passage:¹⁶

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 [...] and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality[.]¹⁷

This interpretation, though, has implications too implausible to attribute to Mill. As Miller asks: ‘How, for instance, could ten minutes of one person’s pleasurable reading philosophy possibly be worth more than all of the physical sexual pleasure to be experienced by humanity over the next 1,000 years?’¹⁸ In fact, Mill does not make this claim: in the passage cited, he only registers a *sufficient* condition for considering one pleasure of a higher quality to another – not a *necessary* condition.¹⁹

In reality, Mill gives very little indication as to how to weigh quality against quantity of pleasure – he simply does not speak to the specifics of how varying quantities of pleasures at varying qualities are to be reconciled against one another. Indeed, given the vast array of different *sorts* of pleasure human beings are capable of experiencing, there may well be no formula to derive a ranking. This is not to say that there *is* no ranking between them. Rather, given the choice between five units of the pleasure of art appreciation and fifty units of the pleasure of gentle dozing, it may be that there is no decision procedure to determine the optimal choice, except practising careful judgment, in dialogue with other competent judges.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid. ¹⁶ See Riley 1993 and 2003. ¹⁷ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 211.

¹⁸ Miller 2014. The assumption that the pleasure of reading philosophy is qualitatively higher than that of sex is a substantive one, though the point generalises easily.

¹⁹ See Saunders 2011.

²⁰ Note, of course, that the verdict that x is more valuable than y by competent judges need not be taken to *constitute* x ’s status as more valuable, even if this is the only manner by which to discover this status. Most interpreters take it that Mill holds that the competent judges *track* the value of pleasure. See, however, Millgram 2000 for a contrasting view.

On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final.²¹

It has sometimes been claimed that by incorporating qualitative concerns, Mill abandons hedonism as a theory of value.²² It should be obvious from the exposition offered here that this is not so. Mill's denial that the ordering of values takes place solely on the basis of quantity of pleasure generated does not imply that anything *other* than pleasure is valuable. Rather, it implies that quality can be a feature which in part determines the ranking of exactly the same pleasurable experiences that all other hedonists value.

None of what has so far been said addresses the substantive issue of which *sorts* of pleasures are of higher quality than others. Commentators have been quick to accuse Mill of prudishness on the basis of his apparent privileging of pleasures of the mind. Certainly, he uses Socrates as an example of one who is capable of higher pleasures 'of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments'.²³ But Mill's doctrine need not be read as restrictively intellectualist: if Socrates is chosen on this occasion, Pericles is the choice in *On Liberty*.²⁴ The sustained contrast Mill appeals to is not between intellectual pleasures and physical pleasures, but rather between the pleasures which involve distinctively human capacities and those that do not.

Such pleasures certainly do include those that might ordinarily be thought of as physical. The pleasure I receive from carelessly swinging on my chair does not represent the same quality of pleasure as that enjoyed by someone executing a carefully mastered complicated gymnastic manoeuvre – but both tasks are certainly physical. The pleasure generated by eating popcorn in the cinema is not the same sort of pleasure as someone appreciating fine cuisine, but terming the latter an 'intellectual' pleasure would misrepresent the experience entirely. The relevant distinction seems to be one of *activity*, and, in this sense, speaks to the nineteenth-century concerns outlined above. Certain pleasures – and this may be a characteristic of the animal pleasures – are enjoyed passively. The gap is perhaps best understood as that between being *given* pleasure by certain experiences, and *taking* pleasure *in* experiences. The former involves a receptive stance to the world. The latter requires a concerted activity – *doing*, with an engaged awareness of what one is doing.

²¹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 213. ²² See, for example, Moore 1993: 130–2.

²³ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 211. ²⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 18: 266.

This focus on activity is connected to the arguments offered in *On Liberty*. As is well known, *On Liberty* argues for the preservation of a sphere of liberty for the individual, inside which his conduct should remain free from coercive interference. Freedom, to the previous generation of philosophical radicals, was argued for on the basis that it would allow individuals to better satisfy their pre-existent desires: illiberal modes of government were criticised on the grounds that they led to the unnecessary frustration of interests of a large section of the population. Mill preserves this argument, but incorporates it into a broader case for freedom, which becomes a mechanism not just for *pursuing* one's interests and desires, but for the *development* of one's interests and desires.

Freedom is important to Mill primarily because it allows room for self-development: for the formation of interests and desires that are genuinely one's own. 'He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.'²⁵ Such a life, passively received, would not involve genuine identification with one's own experiences. A situation in which each took their model of life from the prevailing consensus would be one in which lives were lived in a manner 'inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic'.²⁶ Such lives do not allow for the possibility of experiencing higher pleasures.

In the climate of conformity, human character is quashed. Individuals 'become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own'.²⁷ Such, Mill thinks, was the mistaken ideal of Calvinism, which sought to root out, rather than cultivate, the seeds of human nature. In place of such self-abnegation and alienation, Mill advocates a 'Greek ideal of self-development'.²⁸ He encourages the fostering of 'spontaneity' and 'individuality', the full and unimpeded exploration of the individual's own nature.²⁹ Consistently with his overall naturalistic approach, this argument for freedom is an anthropological one, based not on 'abstract right', but on considerations about the conditions under which human beings at a certain stage of development thrive, and are most truly happy.³⁰

THE 'PROOF' AND MORALITY

We have so far dealt with the content of Mill's axiology – what things he thinks are valuable. Mill's attempt to demonstrate this axiology in Chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism* has been the subject of much controversy. His 'proof of the

²⁵ Ibid., 262. ²⁶ Ibid. ²⁷ Ibid., 265. ²⁸ Ibid., 266. ²⁹ Ibid., 264. ³⁰ Ibid., 234.

principle of utility' takes place by way of three subclaims. Mill means to show that:

- (a) happiness is desirable as an ultimate end,
- (b) nothing but happiness is desirable as an ultimate end, and
- (c) each person's happiness is equally desirable.

Mill indicates that '[b]y happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain'.³¹ As such, by demonstrating the truth of these three subclaims, he will have shown impartialistic hedonism to be true.

Though much has been made of the argument for (a), Mill assumes it relatively uncontroversial. True to his naturalism, which allows no appeal to sources other than ordinary experience and observation, Mill argues that the best and only possible evidence that something is desirable is that people do desire it.

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.³²

The analogy he presents in the first two sentences of this passage is clearly not a good one, and this is the root of the accusation that Mill commits the naturalistic fallacy.³³ The fact that something can be seen or heard *means* that it is visible or audible, and there is no such *a priori* link between what is desired and the desirable. But this does not at all undermine Mill's basic argument, which is merely that something's being desired serves as evidence ('[c]onsiderations [...] capable of determining the intellect'³⁴) for its desirability.

Every agent, Mill suggests, under 'practised self-consciousness and self-observation',³⁵ is forced to admit that they *do* desire happiness for its own sake, at least amongst other things. This is an anthropological reality that cannot fail to have a bearing on our view of ethics. In the absence of undermining arguments, the fact that observed agents *do* universally exhibit a primitive desire for happiness serves as overwhelming evidence for its desirability. Mill refuses to take scepticism about this natural tendency seriously without compelling evidence – in just the same way that he treats our natural

³¹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 210. ³² Ibid., 234.

³³ See Moore 1993: 117–26 for the classic statement of this criticism.

³⁴ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 208. ³⁵ Ibid.

tendency to believe inductive generalisations as trustworthy in the absence of undermining reasons.³⁶

Mill's basic strategy in arguing for (b) is to show that other candidates to be added to our axiology are desired either as *means* to happiness, or as a *part of happiness*. The claim that many apparently desirable things are not so, being desired only as means, is an uncontentious and familiar move. Mill's talk of *parts* of happiness is more obscure. Mill holds that certain objects desired originally as means to happiness can become so psychologically intertwined as to be inseparable from happiness – we would, that is to say, be caused a net-loss of happiness to be without them.

Mill offers the example of virtue. 'Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed, it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good.'³⁷ There is counterfactual dependence of the desirability of virtue on its conduciveness to pleasure – had virtue not been conducive to pleasure, it would not have been desired. This is not to say that it is desired only as a means, 'as a psychological fact' – but it does undermine any claim it has to being ultimately desirable.³⁸ Such, Mill argues, is the origin of all we desire as an end, other than happiness.

Mill spends very little time at all on (c). He argues for it thus: 'each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore a good to the aggregate of all persons'.³⁹ In one respect, Mill is here simply confirming his methodological individualism by stating that the good of a group can be nothing other than the good of its members. But the claim is clearly deeper than that. Mill's view of value is at root impersonal: to say that something is good-for-*x* is to say that it is a good *simpliciter*, held by *x*. The supposition that 'equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether felt by the same or by different persons'⁴⁰ is clearly contentious, however: one might well insist that adding to the happiness of the content or undeserving is *not* to add to the general good at the same level as adding to the happiness of the discontent or deserving.

³⁶ See Macleod 2013. Mill does not seek to supplant everyday morality with a set of abstractly deduced norms, but rather to sharpen moral reasoning that is in any case present: 'If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so' (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 234). This stance, I have argued, is instructively similar to Kant's use of 'Common Human Reason'. See Macleod 2014.

³⁷ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 236. ³⁸ Ibid., 235. ³⁹ Ibid., 234. ⁴⁰ Ibid., 258n.

It is important to note that the claims made so far concern *axiology*. They concern what states of affairs are valuable – which outcomes are *good*. These axiological claims are, in themselves, silent on the question of *rightness* – a point which is easy to miss. While some accounts of the rightness of an action might suggest that an action is morally right if and only if it brings about the highest amount of value in the world possible, Mill's does not. Maximising utilitarianism is a coherent moral stance – and when, for instance, Mill writes that ‘actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness’,⁴¹ he does seem to suggest that this is his view. But other, more careful, statements clearly show that this is not his considered position.

We are not morally obliged, Mill thinks, to bring about the *best* outcome: there are many circumstances in which, though a high-level self-sacrifice might optimise happiness in the world, this is nevertheless not morally required. It is a mistake to think ‘that whatever is not a duty is a sin. [...] There is a standard of altruism to which all should be required to come up, and a degree beyond it which is not obligatory, but meritorious’.⁴² The question arises, then, of Mill's standard of *moral rightness*, and its relation to his *theory of value*. The clues are given in Chapter 5 of *Utilitarianism*, and in *System 6*: xii. In Chapter 5 of *Utilitarianism*, Mill clearly links the notion of *morality* to that of *punishment*.

We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience. This seems the real turning point of the distinction between morality and simple expediency.⁴³

An act or omission might cause a net-loss in terms of happiness, but if it is not something that an individual ought to be punished for, ‘it is not a case of moral obligation’.⁴⁴ The conceptual connection of morality to punishment of course opens up the question of how the appropriateness of punishment can be spelt out without any prior appeal to morality, and how this view of morality fits together with Mill's overall theory of value.

We must note first of all that morality is, for Mill, only *one* domain of practical reason. Bentham is in error in ‘treating the *moral* view of actions and characters, which is unquestionably the first and most important mode of looking at them, as if it were the sole one’.⁴⁵ The axiology that Mill articulates

⁴¹ Ibid., 210. ⁴² Mill, *Auguste Comte*, 10: 337. ⁴³ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 246.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10: 246. ⁴⁵ Mill, *Bentham*, 10: 112. See also Mill, *Auguste Comte*, 10: 336.

in Chapter 2 and demonstrates in Chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism* grounds practical reason – the ‘Art of Life’, as Mill puts it – as a whole. The Art of Life has three departments: ‘Morality, Prudence or Policy, and Aesthetics; the Right, the Expedient, and the Beautiful or Noble’.⁴⁶ There are norms of prudence: an action is *prudent* simply to the extent that it maximises a person’s individual utility, which can of course be in part a function of others’ utility. There are aesthetic norms: an action is *beautiful* to the extent that it is admired, and excites aesthetic pleasure in its contemplation. Moral norms play a role in guiding and evaluating action, but so do norms of aesthetics and prudence: these too are structured to promote the general happiness, and as such provide reasons for action.⁴⁷ An action is *morally obligatory* if its non-performance should be subject to punishment, by law, opinion or conscience. But, Mill is clear, the notion of the propriety of punishment is tied up with the sentiment of *blame*: we think punishment appropriate only in such circumstances as we feel an agent blameworthy for their conduct.⁴⁸

Like judgments of beauty and prudence, then, our judgments about moral wrongs are constrained by anthropological facts about how we experience and react to the actions of ourselves and others. Such dispositions are of course malleable over time – and part of the project of reforming our ethical lives is learning to respond to actions in terms of sympathy, admiration and blame where we have not previously. Mill recommends that art, poetry and religion be marshalled in the service of advancing and entrenching such sentiments – helping us to identify with our norms, and solidifying their place within our common lives.⁴⁹ What sorts of reform would be desirable is itself an important question, and one to be determined by appealing to happiness, as the overarching end of life.

⁴⁶ Mill, *System*, 8: 949.

⁴⁷ See Loizides 2013: 133–40 for discussion of the various ways in which the distinction between the prudence, morality, and beauty of actions has been read by commentators.

⁴⁸ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 246. See Jacobson 2008, for discussion of this sentimental constraint within Mill’s account of morality.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10: 232; Mill, Letter to Carlyle, 12: 113.

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