

The Threat of Feelings: Emotions in  
Political Philosophy of J.S. Mill<sup>1</sup>

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At first reflection, Mill presents a rather bleak view of the role of feelings in his ethical and political thought.<sup>2</sup> Human beings tend, for example, to rely solely on their feelings in their determination of legitimate interference in the sphere of individual action. As a collectivity, the majority tends to become tyrannical and enforce their culturally determined feelings of acceptable behavior on all others, thus stifling liberty, individuality, and human progress. In contrast to determining limits of action as influenced on feelings of right and wrong, Mill establishes the rational harm principle as the only justifiable limit to individual liberty. However, feelings are not entirely negative in Mill's political thought. Although prejudice of opinion is often underscored by a feeling of infallibility, Mill also argues that truth is only vital if it is supported by strong, deep feelings of commitment and discovering unique feelings of pleasure are essential in the development of individuality and human progress. Mill also understands sympathy for other's emotions as key to allowing the utilitarian pleasure principle to move beyond narrowly defined self-interest. Despite the fact that Mill does suggest a complex role for emotions in his political theory, there are several implications that arise from his approach. Most significantly, Mill assumes that there are "good" and "bad" emotions and the association of emotions to moral objects is important, but artificial. An implication of Mill's assumptions is that emotions are entirely malleable and that it is possible to isolate "bad" emotions from ethical decision-making.

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<sup>2</sup>As a note on terminology, this paper deals with psychological states for which definitions remain a matter of dispute among psychologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers. For example, what is the precise difference among the following terms: "affect," "feeling," or "emotion". Although there is no universally accepted definition to any of these terms, they are often distinguished by their psychological quality. For example, the contemporary use of the word "feeling" is to describe the perception of internal physiological changes, such as those associated with hot, cold, pain, and so forth. Hence, Bob feels hunger or Bob feels hot. In contrast, "emotion" refers to irruptive states that incites automatic, deliberate, and conscious evaluations of some external event. Examples of typical emotions include anger, fear, love, hate and even surprise. Hence, Bob is angry with Joe, because Joe insulted him. In psychology, the term "affect" is a broad, overarching term describing any non-rational state. In Mill's writings, he makes no references to the terms emotions or affect, but he consistently employs the terms "feeling" or "sentiment." From the context, although he Mill sometimes uses the term "feeling" to refer to physiological perceptions such as pain and pleasure, more typically "feeling" refers to what we now call emotions, such as anger, jealousy, envy or pity. Unless otherwise noted in the paper, I will use the terms feelings and emotions as synonymous in reference to the more irruptive states such as anger, fear, etc. For discussion on modern attempts to define emotion, see John T. Cacioppo and Wendy L. Gardner, "Emotion," *Annual Review of Psychology* 50 (1999); Paul Ekman and Richard J. Davidson, "How Are Emotions Distinguished from Moods, Temperaments, and Other Related Affective Constructs?" *The Nature of Emotions: Fundamental Questions*, Eds. Paul Ekman and Richard J. Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Paul E. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

In this paper, I will first examine the role of emotion in Mill's political theory. In particular, the first part of the paper examines the role of feelings or emotions in key aspects of his theory such as the role of emotion in tyranny of the majority and ethical principle. The second part of the paper will examine some of the assumptions and implications of Mill's approach. Specifically, it will examine the implications of his understanding of artificial associations between emotions and moral objects. One such implication is the radical separation of affect and reason. Another implication is a polarity of negative and positive emotions. Finally, as Mill's approach continues to influence contemporary debate, the paper explores some implications of his understanding of emotions for current dilemmas in political and legal decision-making. In the final estimation, despite some rich complexity to Mill's approach, some of his assumptions may result in undermining the very goals of his political project.

### 1. Emotions in Mill

In response to his own education, Mill's version of utilitarianism places a greater emphasis on the role and development of emotions in ethical decision-making than is found in Bentham's earlier formulation. To be fair to Bentham, emotions are a necessary aspect in the determination of ethical judgments.<sup>3</sup> At its core, Bentham's ethics is founded on his principle of utility, in which right actions have the overall tendency to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Bentham identified happiness with pleasure (or those things which he understands as synonymous to pleasure, such as benefit, advantage, good or happiness) and the absence of pain. His theory, as calculation of the net sum of pleasures and pains, necessarily pays considerable attention to human emotion or other forms of affect that are connected with pleasure and pain. Nevertheless, a common criticism of Bentham's theory, and the aspect that Mill found personally debilitating, was that Bentham did not postulate qualitative differences among pleasure or pains. The "net sum" calculation was a quantitative distinction, which included variations in intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, and tendency to be productive of other pleasures. As there is no discernment between pleasures, other than associations with greater or lesser pleasure, affective states and the goals they inspire are indistinguishable from each other. In other words, his theory did not provide a way to argue that utilitarian goals were more pleasurable than any other goal or experience.

It was his inability to discern and qualify pleasure that Mill, in his *Autobiography*, provides as a reason for his nervous breakdown and state of depression in his mid-twenties. In the autumn of 1826, Mill reports his "dull state of nerves" due to the realization that he would have no feeling of joy or happiness even if all objects of his life were accomplished.<sup>4</sup> Mill had been brought up solely under his father's tutelage, with an

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (New York: Macmillan, 1948). For a discussion of Bentham's perspective see Martha Nussbaum, "Mill Between Aristotle and Bentham," *Daedalus*. vol. 133, no 2 (2004); George Loewenstein, "Emotions in Economic Theory and Economic Behavior," *The American Economic Review*, vol. 90, no 2 (2000).

<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909) 89, 91, 97, 95. In his essay "Bentham," Mill also directly criticizes Bentham's utilitarianism for its paucity of discussion of human nature, especially in understanding emotions beyond purely selfish passions or sympathy/hatred to other sentient beings. In particular, Mill argues that Bentham has ignored such essential aspects of human nature such as desire of approval from others, a sense of honour and personal dignity, the passion of the artist, the

education that emphasized the development of rational and analytic habits. His depression, Mill believed, was due to his “habit of analysis [that] strengthen associations between causes and effects, means and ends, but tend[ed] altogether to weaken those which are . . . a matter of feeling.” In other words, the habit of analysis had a tendency to wear away or “perpetually worm at the root” of feelings. Mill’s personal crisis developed out of the recognition that he felt no pleasure in any of his goals, such as the creation of a utilitarian society. Furthermore, there was nothing in his education that would allow him to develop or cultivate such a unique pleasure or to prefer utilitarian goals to any other. It was only through his experience of reading poetry, especially Wordsworth, that Mill found a therapy for his depression. It was, Mill admits, the cultivation of feelings through reading and experiencing poetry that encouraged “sympathetic and imaginative pleasures, which could be shared by all human beings.” Due to his breakdown and realization of the importance of feelings, Mill reports that the “cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in [his] ethical and philosophical creed.”

As we are privy to Mill’s personal reflections on the value of emotions or feeling in the development of his philosophical understanding, it is not surprising to find that emotions are important in his ethical and political philosophy.<sup>5</sup> For example, Mill understands that social behavior is guided, not solely by reason, but by the tenets of custom that form social and antisocial affections. Certain social affections developed out of the obvious interest of society, but others, even those mistaken for the “moral sentiments,” often have little to do with the interest of society. The influence of emotion can be seen in Mill’s argument for freedom of speech, especially as emotion is an element in the vitality of truth. Emotions are also essential in Mill’s understanding of the application of the principle of utility and the creation of individuality, all of which contribute human progress. As will be discussed in the next section of this paper, Mill does incorporate emotions or feelings as an essential component of his philosophic understanding.

#### i. Emotions and Custom or Tradition

In the introduction of Mill’s *On Liberty*, he addresses the inherent danger of democracies to tend toward the tyranny of the majority in political decision-making. The tendency of the majority to force their opinions on others underlies Mill’s concept of the harm principle. His harm principle asserts that the only circumstance in which “power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others,”<sup>6</sup> Over any actions or opinions that primarily concern the rationally mature agent, such as those principally affecting his or her own body or mind, the agent is sovereign. The justification for this principle, which allows each individual to be his own guardian and to possess the liberty to govern his own opinions and actions,

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love of power over others and love of ease. See John Stuart Mill, “Bentham,” *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950) 66-70.

<sup>5</sup> For Mill, emotions were also essential in the promotion of a scientific form of ethology or character development. Although not well developed, in his system of logic Mill argued that rigorous thinking ought to be applied to develop a true science of morality. Such a science of character would demand a systematic, biological and emotionally oriented psychology. For a discussion of Mill’s science of ethology see David E. Leary, “Fate and Influence of John Stuart Mill’s Proposed Science of Ethology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* vol. 43, no 1 (1982).

<sup>6</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978) 9

can be found Mill's understanding of the progress of human nature. At one point in human progress, Mill tells us, the aim of political philosophy and action was to establish institutional checks and limitations on governmental power. However at the point in progress when democracy is established the rulers become identified with the will of the majority of the people. For Mill, such a majority consists in either numerically more numerous or the most active part of the people. At this point, constitutional checks may hold the rulers accountable, but, according to Mill, society itself can become tyrannical by executing its own mandates that can penetrate "much more deeply into the details of life, and enslav[e] the soul itself."<sup>7</sup>

The reason why the danger of societal tyranny remains, despite constitutional and political checks, is that there exists "a feeling in each person's mind that everyone should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathizes, would like them to act."<sup>8</sup> In addition, Mill stresses that opinions on the regulation of human conduct are not supported by reason, but only by the belief that feelings on this subject – how others ought to behave – is sufficient. Hence, human beings judge behavior by self-reinforcing standards, in which the proper behavior is that which is "liked" and improper behavior is "disliked." Social tyranny is derived from the influence of the collectivity of individuals who, as they all like the same behavior, impose their own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on others. The underlying requirement for Mill's "harm principle" is to prevent the development of social tyranny that arises from the human desire for conformity. It is human feeling that establishes the limits and punitive extent of proper conduct (based on our own conduct) and the desire to enforce our preferences on all others. Mill argues that political protections against tyranny are insufficient, because the coercion of behavior comes from social standards reinforced by egocentric feelings.

Mill also describes the source of our self-enforcing, egocentric preference and behavioral norms. They are not, he argues, based on universal or rational principles, but on the tenets of custom. As Mill puts it, the desire for conformity, which manifests itself through an enforcement of our preferences on others, arises from the "magical influence of custom."<sup>9</sup> Although all societies have to place practical limits on individual independence and social control, the rules in no two countries or ages are alike. However, according to Mill, the people, of any given age or country, act as if their rules are universally agreed-upon and obvious to the rest of mankind. The universal or natural aspect morality and law is not found in the specifics of rules, since the preferences of these rules are established by custom; rather, what is universal or natural is the feeling that the rules are self-evident and self-justifying. Nevertheless, the force of custom is so strong that it is continually mistaken as "nature" and people are accustomed to believe that "their feeling on subjects of this nature are better than reasons and render reasons unnecessary." Thus, it would be erroneous to rely solely upon majority consensus to determine the limit between individual liberty and social conduct. This consensus is nothing more than a collectivity of non-rational, self-enforcing "feelings" that everyone ought to behave according to the majority standards. Mill's harm principle is, in this case, necessary as it establishes a limit that is based, not solely on custom or feeling, but also on a rational standard of societal inference.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 5.

## ii. Emotions and Truth

Despite this negative view of unconsidered feeling, Mill also understands feeling as a key aspect in his justification of freedom of expression. Mill does argue that feeling can work against truth, because, similar to the self-enforcing rules of custom, opinions of truth and falsity can become equally self-enforcing. Self-enforcing opinions are based on the common human assumption of infallibility and our general indifference to the actual truth. The belief of the correctness of our opinion is found merely in uncontested feelings of superstition and prejudice. In other words, human beings generally believe their opinions are right and are not interested in having this assumption challenged. However, such human “infallibility” of opinion itself points to the error of this understanding of truth, since “everyone well knows himself to be fallible.”<sup>10</sup> Realistically, Mill argues, opinions fall into three categories – the opinion can be true, it can be false, or it can contain a mixture of truth and falsity. Freedom of speech is necessary for all three categories of the relation of truth to opinion. His argument, for the latter two categories, is obvious since freedom of speech would allow the substitution of false for true opinion.

Yet, Mill also emphatically argues that freedom of speech is necessary even when the opinion is true. In this case, without the active challenge from opposing positions and lively engagement in discussion, truth becomes nothing more than received opinion or simply dead dogma. Assuming truth, independent of argument, is simply an irrational prejudice; the only truth, which ought to be held so by a rational being, is an opinion derived from the cultivation of intellect and judgment. Furthermore, Mill stresses that truth is only meaningful and possessed when it can be defended with (1) arguments that are rationally persuasive and (2) the whole force of the difficulty of the true view has been felt by the subject. Lively apprehension of the truth is not found in rational argument, but in truth that has “penetrated the feelings” or realized in “the imagination, the feelings, or the understanding.” Truth, therefore, cannot be received, but is found in rational argumentation and in the comprehension or feeling of its rational ground. Similar to the need to limit the self-enforcement of conformity of action, Mill bases his argument for freedom of thought and discussion in the lively understanding of truth.<sup>11</sup> Progress of truth, therefore, requires freedom of speech and this lively affiliation to true principles. In the case of human opinion, feeling potentially can reinforce dogma, but it also is required for a challenge to irrational prejudice and an attachment to those truths of rational persuasion.

## iii. Emotions and Happiness

Emotions or feelings are also involved in Mill’s understanding of individuality and the pursuit of individual happiness. According to Mill, human happiness lies in the freedom to pursue our own good in our own way, as long as we do not harm others.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 17, 50, 33-39.

<sup>11</sup> Rosen argues that in the argument of *On Liberty* Mill, himself, follows this pattern. The text is not simply a rational argument addressing the intellect alone but is “intended to appeal to deep feelings and strong emotions” in order to convince people of the truth of his argument. In specific, Rosen is arguing against an interpretation that the Anglo-American tradition lacks an appeal to emotions, feelings, and sensory responses in its ethical arguments. Frederick Rosen. “J.S. Mill on Socrates, Pericles and the Fragility of Truth” *The Journal of Legal History*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2004), 181, 192.

<sup>12</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 55-57, 65.

Liberty is necessary to protect the choice of action as much as thoughts and opinions. The good each pursues ought to be based on one's own character and not a simple imitation of unconsidered traditions and customs. Tradition and custom provide too narrow and often an unsuitable experience for each individual. Custom as the sole guide of individual choice also provides dead experience, as merely following a pattern of custom does not provide the conditions in which human faculties of perception, judgment and discriminative feeling increase. The comparative worth of each individual comes from his ability to choose his own plan of life.

In addition, since human beings have a diversity of tastes, what one person enjoys or what helps him cultivate his higher nature is often a distracting burden or a hindrance to another. As a consequence, without diversity in the mode of human experience, human beings cannot obtain their fair share of happiness, nor develop to their mental, moral or aesthetic potential. The font of individuality is found, thus, in experiencing a diversity of pleasures and pains through which each individual chooses those pleasures that suit his or her own character. Also significant, as Mill understands there to be higher and lower pleasures, experiencing both would lead to a greater pursuit of noble pleasures. Although Mill admits that not everyone is necessarily capable of pursuing the higher pleasures, liberty provides the conditions for those who are capable to experience such pleasures. Importantly, for Mill, individual happiness itself, as well as the means by which happiness is pursued, is not solely rational or mental. Mill argues that happiness requires the recognition of one's unique feelings of pleasure and the cultivation of a plan of life with all facilities of judgment and feeling.

#### iv. Emotions and Ethics

This understanding of individuality, as connected to the diversity of pleasures and pains, also highlights the role of feelings in his utilitarian ethics. Simply put, the foundation of morality is the utility or greatest happiness principle.<sup>13</sup> This principle postulates that actions are right if they tend, in proportion, to promote happiness; wrong actions are those that tend, in proportion, to produce the opposite of happiness. Mill defines happiness as "pleasure and absence of pain" and unhappiness as "pain and the privation of pleasure." Even on this basic level, utilitarianism posits a role for human affect, as it is affect that "feels" pleasure and pain; however, Mill also understands emotion as the key element that allows utilitarianism to surmount the individualistic hedonism of seeking only one's own pleasure. For Mill, we have the capacity for sympathy or affection for our fellow-creatures.<sup>14</sup> Sympathy is not itself an emotion; instead, sympathy is the capacity to be affected by the emotions or feelings of others to such an extent that agent takes on, or feels, pleasure and pain at the sight of another's emotion. In other words, the agent feels his own pleasure at another's pleasure and his own pain at another's pain. For Mill, sympathy allows human beings to motivate actions beyond immediate self-interested pleasure to maximize pleasure that leads to the greatest happiness for all. It is sympathy and emotions such as affection and love that allow utilitarian ethics to move beyond calculations of actions with selfish consequences.

<sup>13</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987) 16, 40-41.

<sup>14</sup> L. A. Paul, "The Worm at the Root of the Passions: Poetry and Sympathy in Mill's Utilitarianism," *Utilitas* vol. 10, no. 1 (1998): 86-87.

Sympathy is also important in Mill's understanding of the development of a sense of justice. Mill argues that the two key ingredients of justice include the desire to punish those who have done harm and the knowledge that harm has been done.<sup>15</sup> This desire to punish harm is due to the outgrowth of two natural instincts – (1) the impulse of self-defense and (2) sympathy. Mill's harm principle, as a limit of action and thought, can be seen in this sense of justice. The harm principle allows each individual freely to follow his desires as long as he does not harm others. It is not society's sanctions, but the subject's impulse for self-defense that ought to control actions that primarily affect the subject himself. Retaliation and self-defense are natural, since even animals exhibit attempts to hurt those who have hurt them or their young. Thus, it is natural, according to Mill, resent or desire to retaliate when harm is done either to ourselves or to others with whom we sympathize. In addition, human beings, because we have a more developed intelligence, have a wider range of sentiments and are capable of apprehending a community of interest between the individual and the society of which he is a part. For Mill, since one of the greatest threats to societal progress is the restriction of individual liberty (except in the case of harm), human beings can develop sympathy for the good of society and support proper sanctions. Thus, moral and judicial rules that forbid mankind to harm others, including wrongful interference with freedoms, can be supported by human sympathy.

For Mill, the development of political limits and ethical rules include feelings and sympathy for other's pleasures, pains, and desire to avoid harm. For Mill, it is this same sense of justice and sympathy that also develops the human notion of rights. A "right" is found in the sense of sympathy for others and in the equal demand that they ought to be sympathetic to us; rights are nothing more than the claim of each individual in the society to protection from their fellow creatures.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Mill argues that ethical action requires more than abstract claims to protection, but the energy of feelings to motivate the intensity and strength of obligations of right and justice. This intensity also inspires truly moral feelings that sanction the agent's own behavior. A true moral feeling would be a pain at one's own violations of rules, independent of any expected punishment.<sup>17</sup> True morality, therefore, extends well beyond any natural desire to retaliate against personal injustice. Morality moves the sentiments beyond limited self-interest to sanctioning one's own behavior and punishing third parties who harm another. Morality is a sense that self-interest includes the interests of all human beings. Nevertheless, the energy underlying the thirst to punish those who do harm is not simply some rational calculation, but an emotional desire.

It is because there is energy in our desire to retaliate against those who do harm that feelings remain at the core of motivating ethical action. Mill does not argue that utilitarian ethics should be devoid of desire or feeling. Instead, he understands that "desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being as beliefs and restraints."<sup>18</sup> Even strong desires or feelings are not necessarily dangerous; strong desire

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<sup>15</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 68-69, 78, 74.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 70-72.

<sup>17</sup> Mill makes this comment on true moral feelings in a letter dated the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 1859 to Dr. W. G. Ward. As quoted in D. G. Brown, "Mill on Liberty and Morality," *The Philosophic Review* vol. 81, no. 2 (1972) 156.

<sup>18</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 56-57.

is simply another name for energy. For Mill, when the desires are stronger, more diverse, and properly cultivated “they are capable, possibly of more evil, but certainly of more good.” In fact, the greater danger lies in passively following tradition without the passion and energy of pursuing one’s own individuality and noble pleasures; there is greater threat in the deficiency of personal impulses and passions, because deficiency cultivates indolent and passive characters. According to Mill, it is not because men’s desires are strong that they act badly, but because their conscience is weak. Since the essence of the human conscience is a disinterested sense of duty to others, mixed with strong feelings of sympathy, affection, and desire for esteem, the development of conscience requires attention to developing a sense of sympathy.

Finally, the cultivation and education of feelings are paramount in a moral or just society, because, as Mill argues, it is the cultivation of feelings that associate the feeling with a moral action. For Mill, there are no natural associations between certain feelings and particular objects or ideas.<sup>19</sup> In other words, there are no natural moral emotions and feelings are based on arbitrary, not natural associations with moral objects. Mill believes that no one naturally feels pleasure in fulfilling one’s duties or pursuing the greatest good for the greatest number. Doing one’s duty is only felt as pleasure if a feeling of pleasure is cultivated, educated, or associated with duty. It is at this juncture that Mill’s criticism of his own education can be best understood. As stated above, Mill understood his education as one that excelled in analysis but failed to cultivate sufficient sympathy for others. Mill had the intellectual grounding for analysis, but lacked any real desire or feeling of pleasure associated with humanitarian ends. Mill attributes this lack of desire to the fact that he utterly lacked a strong sense of sympathy for others. As he argues, it was his later, secondary education in poetry that cultivated not only a strong pleasure in the love of rural objects and natural scenery, but also, through the poet’s emotions, his ability to feel another’s pleasure and pain. For Mill, human sympathy is found in a strong sense of identification and feeling with another’s pleasure and sorrow. Thus, what poetry allowed him to do was to develop his capacity for sympathy and create the association of his feeling of pleasure with tenets of utilitarian philosophy. Thus, education is required of the emotions in order to associate pleasure with proper, moral goals. Left unconsidered, feelings and emotions would attach to the prejudices of custom or, as in Mill’s case, be underdeveloped and, thus, become debilitating.

## 2. Insights of Mill’s Approach to Emotions

Despite Mill’s professed break from his disproportionately analytical education and the prominence given to feelings in his theories of truth, liberty, individuality and ethics, Mill’s philosophy remains committed to three assumptions regarding the role of affect in human decision-making. First, he remained committed to understanding the connection of feelings to objects as entirely based on arbitrary or artificial associations.<sup>20</sup> Second, his theory contains an assumption that the intellect and the feelings are entirely separate realms of the human mind. Third, Mill sustained the perspective that feelings or emotions consist of a negative/positive polarity based on whether or not the feelings are pleasurable or painful. As Mill posits a qualitative hierarchy to pleasures, he further distinguishes potentially “good” emotions from “bad” emotions. Therefore, although he

<sup>19</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*. 93-98. See also Paul, 84.

<sup>20</sup> For more discussion on the first two points on Mill’s assumptions, see Paul, 84.



highlights the importance of “deep feelings” he does regulate emotions to artificial associations and determines a polarity of good and bad feelings. Such assumptions underlie his argument for a poetic education in emotions, but do reveal a weakness in his ethical theory.

i. Emotional Association

Mill remains committed, in his understanding of the role of emotion in ethical and political theory, to the idea that there is no natural connection between emotions or feelings and objects, situations, ideas, or circumstances. Mill maintains this perspective even though he understood his breakdown as a consequence of a disassociation of pleasure with any external goals, such as those of utilitarianism.<sup>21</sup> As Mills stresses in his *Autobiography*, there are no objects or goals in the external world that are naturally pleasurable or painful; there is always something artificial and causal in the associations produced. His breakdown emphasizes his understanding of this association. What he felt was lacking in his education was attention given to the development of a strong or deep association between his “pleasure” and “creation of utilitarian society.” The emotions are artificial, but the correct education would create associations that “become so intense and inveterate as to be practically indissoluble.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, because analysis tended to wear away emotional associations, the strength of this connection must be made before an education in the habitual exercise of the power of analysis. Thus, for Mill, a vibrant poetic education, especially developing associations of pleasure to human sympathy, was a precursor to analytic education.

Mill’s understanding of artificial emotional associations has consequences for his understanding of ethics. Mill does stress that affect is a part of moral decisions – it is the energy from strong emotions, for example, that motivate one to act on desire to punish offenders. Nevertheless, the actions that we judge and feel are “good” or “bad” are those that are the products or creations of our experience and education. We may, he would agree, have a natural inclination to punish violators of justice, but what we feel is “just” or “unjust” is simply a product of our experiences. Remember, for Mill, custom, experience, and education is king when it comes to our moral feelings. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill clearly criticizes philosophers who argue that there is a natural moral sense or faculty that informs us of right and wrong.<sup>23</sup> Mill does believe that there are moral feelings, but he stresses that “moral feelings are not innate, but acquired,” much in the same way as speech, reason, or the cultivation of the soil are acquired by human experience. Thus, it is through our experiences that we feel pleasure in the happiness of others and come to feel that moral actions are pleasurable.

Mill also stresses that since we are social beings, the desire to be in unity with others provides a strong incentive toward the development of these moral feelings. However, moral feelings are not in and of themselves natural and they are capable of being cultivated in almost any direction “by sufficient use of the external sanctions and of the force of early impressions.” It is possible, therefore, to completely control the development of these feelings and the associations of pleasure and pain by external manipulation. The right sort of education would encourage the association of pleasure

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 91-98.

<sup>22</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 17; 44-45.

with ideas or actions that would benefit humanity; however, it is just as possible that education could create individuals who feel pleasure, for example, in another's pain. Feelings and the association of moral feelings are, in modern language, culturally constructed or entirely malleable to experience. It is significant for Mill that even though there is an incentive to develop such moral sentiments, this sentiment is wholly plastic and entirely a product of experience.

## ii. Intellect and Feeling

An important consequence of Mill's understanding of feelings as based on artificial associations is revealed in his understanding of the relationship between feelings or affect and the intellect. Mill does not view the human mind as more than a calculative faculty and he criticizes Bentham's utilitarianism for ignoring the complexity of human motivations and positing too narrow a conception of human beings as rational creatures.<sup>24</sup> Yet, Mill does understand this aspect of human nature, intellect and affect, to be distinct aspects of the mind. For example, in his argument for freedom of speech, Mill states that suppressing dissenting opinions is dangerous because it lulls both the human mind and heart.<sup>25</sup> Commitment to the truth requires that it is alive in both the feelings and understanding. His language reveals that the experience of truth is really on two separate levels. First, for rational beings, there is an intellectual apprehension of the truth by means of "knowledge of the grounds of the opinion" such that one could defend it against objections. Without this intellectual understanding or "knowing the truth" all one possesses is superstition. Second, there is a decline in the living power of opinion when it remains unchallenged and no longer penetrates the feelings. For Mill, we often are taught principles and knowledge but the meaning of this knowledge is not fully realized until personal experience has brought it home. Truth requires both an intellectual understanding and an emotional commitment to the correct judgment. Thus, Mill understands that comprehension of truth requires two distinctive aspects – "clear apprehension and deep feeling of truth."

Beyond understanding affect and reason as discrete or dichotomous aspects of the mind, Mill understands that each aspect requires a different kind of education. He also understands that reason and affect have the potential to be at with each other, if reason does not direct the proper education of affective associations. For example, we know from Mill's *Autobiography* that he blamed his breakdown on a lack of emotional education, specifically an education in sympathy to other's emotions.<sup>26</sup> Mill pointed out that he was abundantly trained in analytical skills or the ability to comprehend the grounds of opinion. However, he also needed the right sort of education, one rich in poetry that would edify the emotional aspects of his mind. Since pleasures and pains are forcibly associated with things, unlike analytical training, emotional education needs to create associations that should be so intense as to be practically indissoluble. Furthermore, the education of affect ought to come before any intellectual training in analysis in order to avoid a weakening of emotional association. In fact, since emotional associations are always artificial, without a strong association of pleasure to humanitarian goals, the habit of analysis will also wear away the feelings connected to this goal. In

<sup>24</sup> Lynn Zastoupil, "J. S. Mill and India," *Victorian Studies* vol. 32, no 1 (1988) 51.

<sup>25</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 39, 34, 41, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 90-92.

this sense, as Mill experienced it in his own life, an analytical education can undermine all but the most intensely experienced emotional associations. Yet, it is important to recognize the association, even if intense, remains artificial. The poetic education, similar to tradition or custom, can only make those associations seem “natural.”

Mill does not provide much in the way of a precise psychology, but his general picture of the relationship between reason and emotion is that of a dualistic mind. First, reason and affect remain separate aspects of the psyche and require separate and distinctive forms of education. Second, it is emotional associations, reinforced and learned through the “magical influence of custom” that guides the opinions concerning rules of conduct. For Mill, each of us is guided by a conformist feeling of the standard of judgment. In the case of pure tradition, the association of feelings with standards is not supported by reason and is nothing more than unconsidered prejudice. Since this associated feeling is usually supported by the assumption of infallibility, it can work against liberty and, for Mill, ultimately truth and human progress. A similar danger to truth and progress lies in intellectual understanding unsupported by strong associations of deep feeling for the truth. Thus, for Mill, intellect and feelings can undermine each other, but, importantly, they can also be committed to the same goals. With a separate education, intellect and feeling need not always be at war.

### iii. Negative/Positive Emotions

A second consequence of Mill’s understanding of artificial associations is an assumption of a negative/positive polarity to emotions. This polarity is based on whether or not the emotions are experienced as pleasurable or painful. Not unexpected for a utilitarian, pleasurable emotions are considered good or positive and painful emotions are bad or negative. In Bentham’s understanding of this polarity, pleasure and pain comes in degrees and can be measured in comparison to each other on a single scale. Bentham’s utility calculus does include an assessment of short-term pain for longer-term pleasure, but Bentham does not distinguish between higher and lower pleasures or the feelings associated with such pleasure. As mentioned, Mill does depart from this understanding and posits a qualitative distinction between pleasures and pains. Mill’s famous example in *Utilitarianism* is that there are intrinsically superior kinds of pleasures and those who pursue such higher pleasures are more happy than those who pursue the lower pleasures.<sup>27</sup> The higher pleasures, for Mill, are connected with the cultivation of a noble character. Again, not coincidentally, such a character would be one who feels pleasure in the goals of utilitarian philosophy, such as pursuing the utilitarian standard of the greatest amount of happiness for all. Thus, Mill is able to pronounce: “it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

Mill’s insistence on qualitative differences between pleasures allows him to categorize feelings along a negative and positive valence as to whether the emotion is properly an object of admiration or of contempt.<sup>28</sup> Feelings that are admired are those that encourage the individual toward the ideal perfection of human nature, such as feelings of pleasure in self-constraint, amicability, and pleasures of the intellect. Contemptible pleasures include both self-destructive pleasures, such as rashness and self-conceit, as well as the anti-social pleasures of cruelty, malice, envy, dissimulation,

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<sup>27</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 18-20.

<sup>28</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 76-77.

irascibility, resentment, love of domineering over others, greed, and pride. As the purpose of *On Liberty* is to argue that the limit of social and government interference is the harm principle, Mill points out that individuals who pursue self-destructive pleasures may be avoided or objects of pity, but it is unjustifiable to interfere with these pleasures. In contrast, Mill argues that it is not only the actions inspired by anti-social feelings, but also anti-social feelings that are fit objects of moral retribution and punishment. In other words, there are certain emotions that are good, others that are undesirable (but allowed), and still other emotions that are strictly bad and are in the purview of social control and punishment. In Mill's understanding of an ethical society pursuing the happiness and harm principle, certain emotions can be justifiably sanctioned.

### 3. Implications of Mill's Approach to Emotions

Mill's understanding of the role of feeling, especially in his principles of liberty and ethics, supports a particular perspective to understanding emotions that is reflected in some contemporary approaches to emotions.<sup>29</sup> For example, Mill's theory can be seen reflected in contemporary approaches that assume emotions are (1) plastic and culturally constructed, (2) that reason and emotions are dichotomous aspects of decision-making, and (3) that there is a negative/positive polarity to emotional responses. More significantly for this paper, Mill's perspective can be seen reflected in the views of contemporary theorists on the role of emotion in ethical and political decision-making. In particular, the adoption of Mill's perspective assumes that "undesirable" emotions can be detached or isolated from political and ethical decision-making. In the final estimation, although Mill offers important insights and highlights the role of feelings in his theory, an uncritical acceptance of his assumptions impoverishes the understanding of the role of emotions in sociopolitical analysis.

The implications of Mill's theory for contemporary approaches to emotions emerge from the interaction of the three main insights outlined above. To summarize, Mill understands feelings to have purely artificial connections to objects. This means that there is not a natural or necessary connection of our emotions to ideas, people, or objects, including moral objects. There are emotions, for Mill, which through experience develop into something like a moral sentiment, but there is no essential connection of particular emotions with moral objects. Human beings do have the capacity for nobler feelings, but such capacity is "a tender plant, easily killed."<sup>30</sup> This artificiality also means that, in essence, emotions are almost entirely malleable, plastic or what is now termed culturally-constructed.

Significant to Mill's understanding that emotions are entirely malleable, his theory also implies that emotions are separate from reason or intellect. He is emphatic in his understanding that truth, for example, requires "deep feeling" and that affect requires an entirely unique educational experience. Nevertheless, since emotions are separate from reason, it is through our rational connection to certain moral principles that we can direct the proper education of emotions toward the proper objects. Reason can direct or tend to the "tender" plant of the emotional capacities to result in a particular goal. For

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<sup>29</sup> For a good summary of contemporary approaches to the study of emotions see Griffiths, 1-20; 50-55; 77-99. See also Robert C. Solomon, *Not Passion's Slave: Emotions and Choice* (Oxford University Press, 2003). For a good example of contemporary adoption of the polarity assumption, see Loewenstein, 426.

<sup>30</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 20.

Mill, this end is one in which individuals feel pleasure in the nobler pursuits of the intellect, self-control, and in sympathizing with others. Most importantly, for Mill, such associations can direct abhorrence for even possessing, either oneself or others, certain anti-social feelings, such as envy, love of domination, or pride. Mill even suggests that purely self-destructive emotions should be the object of pity, but never of resentment or anger. Thus, because emotions have no natural ties to objects, especially moral objects, it is entirely possible to manipulate emotions to be elicited toward certain objects or situations.

One implication of Mill's theory is that it potentially obscures the purpose of emotions in human decision-making. Despite the fact that most contemporary scientific approaches to emotions, as well as common folk psychology, have adopted Mill's perspective of negative/positive emotional polarity, this assumption is being challenged. For example, Robert Solomon was one of the first advocates who disputed the notion of emotional polarity as both simpleminded and detrimental to serious research on emotions.<sup>31</sup> Solomon argues that emotions are not connected in any meaningful way to pleasures and pains; for example, love can be pleasurable, but most of us have also experienced it as painful. Fear, which is typically regarded as a negative, painful emotion is also necessary for self-protection in dangerous situations. He argues that emotions are, in and of themselves, neither positive nor negative and that such determinations are really ethical judgments of desirable or undesirable actions. The criticism of adopting Mill's perspective is that thinking of emotions with such polarity clouds the complexity of emotions and undermines the relationship among emotions and even between emotions and reason.

Evolutionary psychology also challenges Mill's understanding that feelings or emotions have no natural or innate associations with external objects. This approach, which includes de Sousa and others, understands emotions as natural evolutionary adaptations that facilitate survival by providing suitable reactions to external stimulus.<sup>32</sup> This approach also suggests that not only vengeful desire, but also a wide range of emotions, from indignation and anger to benevolence, love, and hate, are naturally associated with moral objects. This perspective does not deny variability in human morality or suggest a predetermined connection between emotions and particular moral actions. There is no strictly moral emotion or emotion that will always lead to any type of universal moral action. Instead, this perspective suggests that emotional responses consist of a complex interaction between innate inclinations and social experience and that there is a degree of malleability and plasticity to emotional responses. For example, there is a cultural component to the degree and for what reasons individuals feel benevolence towards each other; yet, the capacity to develop benevolence and be inspired to help others is innate. Moral decisions will necessarily include a wide range of emotions. The distinction between this approach and Mill's understanding is that the associations between feelings and objects or ideas are not entirely artificial or completely under the influence of experience. Although the degree and specificity of emotions vary

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<sup>31</sup> Solomon, 177.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987). For other approaches from this perspective see also Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998); Dylan Evans, *Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jonathan Turner, *On the Origins of Human Emotions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

across cultures, emotions are part of the natural human repertoire for facilitating survival in our social environment.

Finally, Mill's assumption that there is essentially no natural emotional associations and that such associations can be completely malleable has implications for how we understand the role of emotions in ethical and political decision-making. Mill's assumptions provide the foundation for arguments, such as that by Nussbaum, which suggests that there are certain appropriate and inappropriate emotions in political and legal decision-making.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, Nussbaum argues that it is not excessive or inappropriately directed disgust, but the feeling of disgust itself, that is improper in political and legal decision-making. For Nussbaum, disgust is inappropriate because it contains a non-egalitarian sentiment towards the object or individuals towards whom one feels disgust and, therefore, undervalues the dignity of individuals. A more appropriate moral emotion would be indignation at the harm of others. The implication of this approach is that legal and social policy should incorporate certain emotions as "ethical" and avoid other undesirable emotions. This approach implicitly assumes that certain emotions deemed "negative" have no necessary connection to ethical decision-making or innate connection to evolutionary behaviors that have facilitated survival.

In challenge to this position is the perspective that emotions do contain natural ties with external objects or ideas. This challenge also rejects the assumption that emotions have a positive/negative polarity, but that they are natural adaptations that facilitate social behavior. One implication of this approach is that no emotion, a priori, can be rejected in decision-making. An example of this position can be found in Kahan's argument for incorporating disgust in legal decision-making. Even though Kahan and Nussbaum support similar liberal policies, Kahan argues against Nussbaum's dismissal of disgust and suggests that disgust is a natural emotion tied to ethical decision-making and is a necessary aspect in developing policy.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is not disgust that is, in and of itself, negative; instead, disgust can be excessive or directed at certain inappropriate objects. Although Kahan does not take this position further, it is possible that the association of certain objects of disgust, even those that are now understood as inappropriate, may have naturally evolved to support survival. It may be true that in the current context that the association of disgust with such objects is now maladaptive and works to undermine a just society. Nevertheless, if disgust is inclined toward certain objects, than an approach that assumes no such link will ultimately undermine its own goals of producing a more egalitarian society or reducing cruelty towards those who choose to act in ways different from the cultural norms. If certain emotions are now inappropriately directed, the stronger position would be one that would understand the link and find ways to counteract its connection. In the end, the assumption of "bad emotions," such as disgust or anger, hate, envy or spite, ultimately undermines the complexity of the role of

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<sup>33</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Dan M. Kahan, "The Progressive Appropriation of Disgust," *The Passions of Law*, ed. Susan Bandes (New York: New York University Press, 1999). For a similar approach see William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

emotions in ethical decision-making and potentially undermines the creation and stability of a just society.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Emotions or feelings do have an important position in Mill's political thought and he does depart from previous utilitarian perspectives. First, he does understand that feelings are an essential aspect of a commitment to truth and philosophic principles. An argument, therefore, requires more than simply an understanding of analytic cause and effects but a deep feeling of the truth. Thus, Mill understands human nature to be far more complex than previous conceptions of utilitarian thought. Second, Mill postulates a distinction between higher and lower pleasures and thus, he can argue that liberty of action and thought is necessary as it allows those who are gifted to pursue ideas and ways of life that challenge the cultural orthodoxy and lead to greater happiness. Despite this broader understanding of the role of emotions, Mill's theory does assume a polarity to emotions as well as a great degree of cultural construction; although current research is challenging these assumptions, Mill's perspective remains influential in modern approaches to emotions. Most significantly, Mill's analysis supports an approach that argues certain emotions, such as envy, disgust, hate, and malice, are entirely negative for social and moral behavior and justify moral retribution and punishment. Such an approach neglects the fact that such emotions, in certain contexts, may facilitate behavior that has positive social or individual outcomes. Furthermore, a perspective that neglects the potential of all emotions to facilitate social behavior detracts from the complexity of emotions in ethical decision-making. Ultimately, one consequence of such a diminished perspective is that it fails to incorporate all "deep feelings." In essence, without the support of the variety of emotions connected to ideas of justice, such as benevolence, indignation, and even disgust, those who are dedicated to values of equality and justice will lack the complete range of emotional support that allows for "deep feelings" of commitment to their ethical positions.

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<sup>35</sup> For an example of hate as another emotion thought to be necessarily problematic in contemporary approaches to political decision-making see Rush W. Dozier, Jr. *Why We Hate* (Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, 2002).

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