MILL'S UTOPIAN UTILITARIANISM

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(Draft: Not for Citation)

I. Introduction

Many people consider utilitarianism a rather depressing view. One might find this astonishing, if all one knew about the theory was that it regards the promotion of happiness to be the foundation of morality. How can happiness be depressing? The answer lies in utilitarianism's equation of promoting happiness with maximizing the total amount of it. In principle, utilitarianism could sometimes call for groups of people who have done nothing wrong to be made profoundly unhappy, even in situations in which it would be possible to avoid immiserating anyone. Suppose, for instance, that some social policy or practice would cause a particular group of people to suffer a great deal over the course of their lives, but would benefit the rest of society. Even if the beneficiaries of this arrangement were people whose lives would go reasonably well in any case, so that the marginal benefit they would receive would only be the proverbial "icing on the cake," if there are enough of them then an exponent of utilitarianism might have to conclude that the policy or practice in question should be adopted. This result could easily induce a sense of gloom.

If the fact that utilitarianism could in principle require such tradeoffs to be made is enough to make it a depressing view, then it is a depressing view. Things may stand very differently, however, if we judge the theory based on what it would require in practice, making realistic assumptions about human beings and the world. In the work of John Stuart Mill we find a positively uplifting picture of what a "utilitarian" society might look like. Mill firmly believes in the general compossibility of happiness. He is confident that it is possible to create conditions in which virtually everyone will be able to lead a genuinely happy life. Moreover, he is convinced that we will not have done everything in our power to bring happiness to a maximum until this has been done. As a society in which virtually everyone leads a genuinely happy life seems to be the closest thing to an ideal society that humans might have any hope of creating, Mill can aptly be called a utopian.

II. Genuinely Happy Lives

According to the most elementary version of hedonism, a happy life, or a happy span of a life, is simply one that contains more pleasure than pain. It may well seem that there is no other sense that a hedonist could possibly give to the notion of a happy life. Yet Mill suggests in his *System of Logic* that a life could be happy in the "in the comparatively humble sense of pleasure and freedom from pain" and yet be "puerile and insignificant."[1] Anyone familiar with Mill's work will know what a life that contains a positive balance of pleasure over pain could still be missing. Mill holds that some kinds of pleasure are "more desirable and more valuable," and hence of higher quality, than others.[2] Pleasures that are of a higher quality contribute more to a person's happiness.

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[1] *CW* VIII, p. 952.

[2] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 211.

The life of a person who does not experience these pleasures, then, or who experiences only glimmerings of them, comes nowhere near the best kind of life that humans are capable of living. In effect, therefore, Mill's thought contains two different standards by which a person's life can be judged to be happy or otherwise. The "lower" standard is that of containing more pleasure than pain. Whether a person's life satisfies this "comparatively humble" standard or not is a fairly straightforward matter; either it does or it does not. The second standard is that of containing something approaching the greatest amount of happiness that it is possible for a human life to contain. Although the term is not Mill's, to the extent that a life meets this standard it might be described as "genuinely happy." Here things are not so cut and dry, for how close a life comes to the ideal is a matter of degree. A significant amount of gray area will be ineliminable. Nonetheless, some lives will clearly deserve to be called happy in this sense, and some will even more clearly deserve to be called unhappy. In fact, Mill says that the lives of his contemporaries are "almost universally" unhappy when judged by this standard.[3]

What are the relative qualities of different types of pleasures? Mill proposes a test to be used in answering this question, the so-called "decided preference test."

> Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.[4]

Mill's apparent claim to be giving a semantic analysis of what he "means" when he says that one pleasure is of higher quality than another notwithstanding, this passage is best read as asserting that the decided preferences of competent judges is the only available evidence of objective differences in the relative quality of pleasures. (Think of Chapter IV of *Utilitarianism*, where he says that the fact that happiness is universally desired is the sole evidence of its desirability.[5]) So what he gives us here is a criterion for judging which pleasures are of higher and which of lower quality. In fact, he gives us two distinct criteria, because the last two sentences of the passage state two different tests. The penultimate sentence states the basic version of the decided preference test. The most plausible way to read it is to suppose that people who have experienced two different pleasures are to be asked which they would prefer to experience again. Implicit in this is the restriction that the quantity of pleasure in these two experiences, the product of the pleasure's intensity and duration, are to be equal. If there is a consensus

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[3] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* VIII, p. 952.

[4] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 211.

[5] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 234.

that experiencing one pleasure would be preferable to experiencing the other, then we should infer that the former is of higher quality. This is the real decided preference test, in the sense that its satisfaction is all that is required for there to be evidence that one pleasure is of higher quality than another. The passage's final sentence describes a second test that is more stringent than the first. For this test, the question is not just whether the competent judges prefer a given quantity of one pleasure to the same quantity of another, but whether they would prefer any quantity of the first to any quantity of the second "which their nature is capable of." If there is a pair of pleasures such that this second criterion is satisfied, then we can infer not only that the first is of higher quality but that it is of vastly higher quality, and hence that it is many times more valuable. This passage is frequently misread by interpreters, with the result that Mill is taken to hold the absurd view that a particular experience of any given pleasure is of infinitely more value than any particular experience of other pleasures that are of a lower quality. This view is open to obvious counterexamples that completely undermine its plausibility.[6] Fortunately, we need not impute it to Mill. Those commentators who do make two mistakes. The first is to fail to notice that the last sentence of the passage states a criterion that is distinct from the one in the preceding sentence, and one that will not necessarily be satisfied by any pair of pleasures that differ in quality. The second is to ignore the phrase "of which their nature is capable" in the last sentence, reading it as if Mill offers his competent judges a choice between a small quantity of one pleasure and an infinite quantity of the other. At most, the sentence implies that a single experience of one pleasure can exceed in value the greatest amount of another pleasure that could be experienced within a single human life. Yet even though the "infinitely greater value" reading misses the mark, it is clearly the case that Mill thinks there can be tremendous differences in the value of different types of pleasure. Therefore, a genuinely happy life will necessarily be one that is rich in higher quality pleasures.

Mill famously maintains that the pleasures that are picked out by the decided preference test as being of the highest quality are "the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments." These, he says, possess "a much

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[6] For instance the following: Suppose that one somehow had it in one's power to bring it about that the world would contain one more experience of a higher quality pleasure than it otherwise would. Let it be whatever pleasure seems to be the most valuable and desirable. This experience, though, would come at a price, namely that for the next billion years no human would ever experience any physical sexual pleasure. Everything else about the world would remain unchanged: people would still engage in the same sexual activities, they would continue to experience other kinds of pleasure (including any higher quality pleasures that might arise out of emotionally-charged lovemaking), etc. The characteristic physical pleasure associated with sexual stimulation and orgasms would be lost, though, until it returned one billion years later (if anyone were around to enjoy it). Surely that would be far too high of a price for humanity to pay for one transitory experience of any pleasure, however lofty in character, and surely paying it would leave the world a less happy place.

higher value as pleasures than . . . those of mere sensation."[7] In order to enjoy these pleasures at all, a being must have what he calls the "knowing," aesthetic, and moral faculties, and those faculties must have been developed to at least a certain minimal degree.[8] As only humans are capable of developing these faculties to the requisite extent, as far as we know, the capacities and the pleasures that they yield can both be described as distinctly human. More highly developed faculties make it possible to enjoy greater quantities of these pleasures, so in order to lead a genuinely happy life one must have attained a reasonably high level of development. When Mill observes that a life with a positive balance of pleasure over pain can nonetheless be puerile and insignificant, he contrasts this with a life that is one "such as human beings with highly developed faculties can care to have."[9] Any life that meets this standard would definitely be a genuinely happy one, although perhaps this label could still be applied to some lives that do not quite meet it. More will be said about this in the next section.

III. Hedonistic Elites

For all that has been written about his qualitative hedonism, Mill's understanding of what it means for our distinctly human faculties to be developed and of exactly how their exercise yields valuable pleasures has received less attention than it should. The fault here is partly Mill's, because he does not say as much about at least the last of these questions as he might have. Take, for instance, the knowing or intellectual faculty, which in actuality comprises various diverse capacities including deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, analysis, memory, introspection, and observation. Mill never attempts to explain precisely why intellectual pleasures are qualitatively superior to those of the body.

In contrast, Mill does make an attempt to explain the qualitative superiority of the pleasures of the imagination. His starting point is an account of the feelings that we experience in response to beauty given by the art critic John Ruskin.

> Mr. Ruskin . . . undertakes . . . to investigate the conditions of beauty. The result he brings out is, that everything which gives us the emotion of the Beautiful, is expensive and emblematic of one or other of certain lofty or lovely ideas, which are, in his apprehension, embodied in the universe, and correspond to the various perfections of its Creator. He holds these ideas to be, Infinity, Unity, Repose, Symmetry, Purity, Moderation, and Adaption to Ends. . . .[10]

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[7] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 211.

[8] "Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews," *CW* XXI, pp. 217–57.

[9] *System of Logic*, *CW* VIII, p. 952.

[10] Note added to James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, *CW* XXXI, p. 224.

Whereas Ruskin takes our emotional reaction to these ideas to be a brute fact of human nature, however, Mill characteristically seeks to give a more complete account of their existence by reference to the association of ideas. His exposition of this account is less than fully transparent, but the thrust is that people tend to form pleasurable associations with certain concepts, as a result of their experiences with things in which those concepts are instantiated. If we encounter a work of great art, however, or a scene of natural beauty, or even a person with a harmoniously developed character, then this may cause us to imagine instantiations of those concepts more pure and consummate than any in the real world, and in consequence we might potentially experience pleasures that surpass in quality the ones involved in the formation of the original associations.

> It is no mystery, for example, why anything which suggests vividly the idea of infinity, that is, of magnitude or power without limit, acquires an otherwise strange impressiveness to the feelings and imagination. The remaining ideas in Mr. Ruskin's list . . . all represent to us some valuable or delightful attribute, in a completeness and perfection of which our experience presents us with no example, and which therefore stimulates the active power of the imagination to rise above known reality, into a more attractive or more majestic world. This does not happen with what we call the lower pleasures.[11]

This leaves the moral faculties. The chief source of pleasure that Mill might call a "moral faculty" is our capacity for sympathy, because of which "The idea of the pain of another is naturally painful; the idea of the pleasure of another is naturally pleasurable."[12] More generally, sympathy is the capacity "of taking on the emotions, or mental states generally, of others."[13] Clearly sympathy has the potential to be a valuable source of happiness, albeit one that can sometimes be a source of unhappiness as well. Sympathy with future generations, Mill believes, is crucial to maintaining interest in life as death draws near.[14] The quality of pleasure that we derive purely via sympathy is not always of a higher quality, but presumably this is sometimes the case. There seems to great potential for the sympathetic and imaginative faculties to interact, so that it might be very possible for a person whose aesthetic sensibilities are sufficiently developed to experience a higher quality pleasure as the result of sympathy with the relatively lower-quality pleasure of another. Someone who is enjoying watching a young child devour an ice cream cone, for instance, and who is struck by the purity of the child's delight, might well enjoy a higher quality pleasure than the object of his or her sympathy. The

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[11] "*James Mill's Analysis of the Human Mind*," *CW* XXXI, pp. 224-6. Obviously it would be a mistake to infer that the pleasure yielded by the contemplation of the idea of infinity will be of infinite value.

[12] "Sedgwick's Discourse," *CW* X, p. 60.

[13] The words here are actually Alexander Bain's, but Mill quotes them approvingly in "Bain's Psychology," *CW* XI, p. 362.

[14] "The Utility of Religion," *CW* X, p. 426.

potential for these faculties to interact seems especially high when sympathy assumes one of its more "complex" forms, such as "the love of *loving*, the need of a sympathizing support, or of objects of admiration and reverence."[15] Mill also assigns sympathy a role in the explanation of why we take pleasure in the knowledge that a wrongdoer has been punished, which is a moral pleasure in a stricter sense of 'moral.'[16]

The low average state of development of the distinctly human faculties in all of the socio-economic classes of Victorian England is a recurrent theme in Mill's work. Exceptions to this rule are sufficiently rare that he regards those individuals in whom one or more of these faculties has been evolved to any significant degree as a kind of elite class. We see this, for example, in his work on democratic theory. In that context, he is primarily concerned with the intellectually advanced "instructed minority" and the "public-spirited" few who have so far transcended personal and class selfishness that "Communism would even now be practicable among" them.[17] While these are ostensibly distinct groups, Mill tends to assume that the intellectual elite and the moral elite are for all intents and purposes co-extensive.[18] This is a dubious assumption, his assertion that a connection exists between "all comprehensiveness and soundness of intellect" and "the sublime impartiality resulting from an ever-present and overruling attachment to duty and to truth" notwithstanding.[19] The question he wrestles with in *Considerations on Representative Government* and elsewhere is that of how Britain can give its intellectual and moral elites political influence commensurate with their ability to contribute, while at the same time opening the doors to mass political participation. It must be stressed here that Mill excludes the vast majority of people who would ordinarily be considered educated and civilized from this moral and intellectual elite; they are disqualified by their narrow sympathies and inability to think for themselves. Mill points out the low state of the aesthetic faculty's development among the British, including even many of those who in other respects deserve to be called enlightened, in his "Inaugural Address Delivered at the University of St. Andrews."[20] The aesthetic elites about whom he has the most say are poets and other artists, although a well-developed imaginative faculty

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[15] "Bentham," *CW* X, p. 96. On the connection between sympathy and "objects of admiration and reverence," see Mill's letter to William George Ward (*CW* XV, p. 650).

[16] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, pp. 240–59. For a discussion of the relation that Mill sees between sympathy and the moral feelings of guilt and blame see Dale E. Miller, "Mill's Theory of Sanctions," *The Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism*, ed. henry West (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 159–73.

[17] *Considerations on Representative Government*, *CW* XIX, pp. 405.

[18] On this see Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, "The 'Roster Device': J. S. Mill and Contemporary Elitism," *Western Political Quarterly* XXI (1968), pp. 20–39.

[19] "On Genius," *CW* I, p. 335

[20] *CW* XXI, pp. 251–6.

could reveal itself in other ways as well. It is as much required for the true appreciation of art as for its production, and Mill suggests that a true love of beauty will manifest itself in a desire to treat one's own life and character as a work of art to be perfected.[21] Again, he would deny that most people who might ordinarily be considered cultured have much in the way of true aesthetic feelings.

Mill does not often mention the notion of higher quality pleasures outside of *Utilitarianism*. In consequence, when he refers in his other works to those individuals whose intellectual, moral, and aesthetic faculties have been extensively cultivated, he seldom if ever mentions their superior capacity for happiness. Nevertheless, in light of *Utilitarianism*'s treatment of the distinctly human pleasures, it is evident that he considers them "hedonistic elites." Whether or not their lives are in fact genuinely happy, they at least possess the developed faculties that are a prerequisite of true happiness. Mill is unlikely to think that someone in whom one or two of the distinctly human faculties remain in a very rudimentary state is able to have a genuinely happy life, regardless of how well developed his or her remaining faculty or faculties are. This, after all, is the state that he takes himself to have been in before and during his "mental crisis"; while his intellect was highly sophisticated, he lacked any affective response to beauty or even to the happiness of others. It is probably also, if to a less extreme degree, the state of many early twenty-first century academics. Even so, a person in whom at least one faculty has been well cultivated is that much closer to possessing the prerequisites of a genuinely happy life.

IV. Universal Development

Mill might very easily have claimed that the existence of roughly the state of affairs that he observes in Victorian Britain, one in the distinctly human faculties of the vast majority of people are insufficiently developed for them to enjoy genuinely happy lives, is a permanent fact of human society. In this case, given his qualitative hedonism, we might well expect him to propose that societies ought to be organized around the small number of elites in every generation whose faculties could be developed to the point necessary in order for them to enjoy significant amounts of the best and most valuable sorts of happiness. Under this scheme, our most important task would be to ensure that those precious few with the ability to enjoy lives rich in the higher quality pleasures did in fact do so. Even if this imposed considerable hardship on everyone else, or at least denied them many opportunities for enjoyment, it would be the way to maximize aggregate happiness. This is hardly an appealing state of affairs. In fact, some critics of utilitarianism object to the theory precisely because there might always be a few individuals capable of far more happiness than everyone else, with the consequence that happiness could best be promoted through institutions and practices that conflict with our intuitions about fairness. The critics' vivid name for these individuals is "utility monsters."

Mill might have offered such a view, but he does not. What he says, instead, is that what can and should be done is to make it possible for virtually everyone to lead a genuinely happy life. He does this in the stretch of *Utilitarianism*'s second chapter that immediately follows his account of the higher quality pleasures. It is a part of the

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[21] "Inaugural Address," *CW* XXI, p. 255.

chapter about which relatively little has been written, but one cannot properly understand Mil's utilitarianism without taking account of it.

Mill begins by observing that lack of development is the main reason that people fail to lead satisfying lives. He points first to the failure to cultivate the moral faculty—the capacity for sympathy—and then to the failure to develop the intellectual and aesthetic faculties.

> When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for nobody but themselves. . . . Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind . . . finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind, past and present, and their prospects in the future.

He then insists that this situation is remediable.

> Now there is absolutely no reason in the nature of things why an amount of mental culture sufficient to give an intelligent interest in these objects of contemplation, should not be the inheritance of every one born in a civilised country. As little is there an inherent necessity that any human being should be a selfish egotist. . . . Genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good, are possible, though in unequal degrees, to every rightly brought up human being. In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, every one who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable. . . .[22]

There are two things that we should take away from this second passage. The first is that Mill believes that even someone whose faculties cannot be cultivated to the levels that might be attained by those individuals with the greatest natural gifts could still reach a level of development sufficient for a genuinely happy life. This seems to be a fair gloss of his expression "an existence which may be called enviable." The second is that it should be more than possible to bring virtually everyone to at least this level of development. He says "every one," in fact, but this rhetorical flourish omits from consideration individuals with disabilities that place a low ceiling on their potential for development.

Three tenets underlie Mill's understanding of how this is possible. The first is the power of education. James Mill had believed that every child is born a blank slate, and that through providing the right kind of environment one could shape his or her mind any way that one wished. This was, as he saw it, a straightforward consequence of associationist psychology.[23] John Stuart Mill is an associationist as well, but he is more

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[22] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, pp. 215–6.

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> According to James Mill's theory, all minds started as much alike as all stomachs or all hands or any other physical organs. . . . Thus, minds differed

willing to recognize that organic differences between people can make it easier for some people to form particular types of associations and can even place different limits on the potential of their different faculties for development.[24] So while "genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good, are possible . . . to every rightly brought up human being," for instance, this is true only in unequal degrees." More generally, in works where Mill discusses the distant future that he hopes humanity will attain, it is clear that he never foresees that people will be completely alike in their prospects for development. With this said, however, he still believes that education has a tremendous power to shape people. 'Education' here means "nurture" (as opposed to "nature") very generally, not just what happens in a school. It is education in what Mill calls 'its largest acceptation,' in which 'Whatever helps to shape the human being; to make the individual what he is, or hinder him from being what he is not—is part of his education.'[25] Mill has the feelings in mind rather than the intellect when he says that "The power of education is almost boundless. . . ."[26] In the intellectual sphere, too, though, he believes that education can accomplish vastly more than it typically does. To his credit, he does not engage in false modesty by saying that James Mill's methods would have succeeded with anyone as well as they did in his, but he takes his case to prove a general point "about how much more than is commonly supposed may be taught, and well taught, in those early years which, in the common modes of what is called instruction, are little better than wasted."[27]

What is required, in order for people to develop their faculties to the greatest extent possible for them, is that they should constantly be making use of them. An early start in life is important, as is avoiding significant stretches of one's life in which they are seldom used, for "Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance. . . . ."[28] Mill contends that education in the narrow sense of classroom instruction is so poor in his Britain precisely because it exercises the intellectual capacities so little, save for the capacity of rote memorization. What is needed is a new manner of teaching that demands more from the student, one that exercises the full range of capacities that constitute the intellectual and aesthetic faculties.

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only in so far as they recorded different chains of experiences, and from them formed different habits of association. (Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: MacMillan, 1954), pp. 14–5.)

[24] *System of Logic*, *CW* VIII, pp. 857–8.

[25] 'Inaugural Address,' *CW* XXI, p. 217.

[26] "The Utility of Religion," *CW* X, p. 409.

[27] *Autobiography*, *CW* I, p.5.

[28] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 213.

> As the memory is trained by remembering, so is the reasoning power by reasoning; the imaginative by imagining; the analytic by analysing; the inventive by finding out. Let the education of the mind consist in calling out and exercising these faculties. . . . Let *cram* be ruthlessly discarded.[29]

Mill stresses the importance of the early development of the moral faculty as well, but he also says more in regard to faculty than he does the others about how its development can be further facilitated later in life. Developing our capacity for sympathy requires developing the habit of attending to the inner lives of others, for while we do possess sympathy by nature, Mill believes, it operates only when we direct our attention toward another's feelings. Exposing students to art turns out to be important for the development of this faculty as well as the aesthetic one. This is true in particular of poetry, the very *raison d'etre* of which is the "the delineation of the deeper and more secret workings of human emotion."[30] More important, though, at least in terms of broadening the circle of people with whom we sympathize, is regularly encountering situations in which we must focus on the thoughts and feelings of others out of sheer practical necessity, because we have to persuade them or negotiate with them in order to get what we want. Thus the social and political institutions and practices under which we live will make a great difference to how wide our sympathies are.[31] In short, with the proper education, every individual ought to be able to develop his or her faculties up to the limit imposed by his or her organic constitution.

The second tenet that Mill relies on is that this would not require an exorbitant amount of rivalrous resources. It would require a serious investment in education, especially early education, and so it would not be cheap. (Mill, by the way, favors funding public education via a voucher scheme.[32]) Still, the main thing that intellectual and aesthetic development require is interaction with people at an equal or greater level of development. This interaction might be either direct or mediated via cultural products like books, works of art, etc. The cultivation of sympathy, as has already been noted, primarily requires interaction with others under conditions in which one must attend to their feelings. Mill emphasizes the importance of political participation in this regard, and the importance of participation in public affairs more generally (where this includes activities such as jury service).[33] In terms of material resources, the costs of this kind of education (broadly conceived) to a society would not be trivial, but they would not be ruinous either. The real cost would be in terms of time. In fact, one concern that might be raised here is that real development would take so much of a

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[29] "On Genius," *CW* I, p. 338.

[30] "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties," *CW* I, p. 345.

[31] See for example *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, pp. 231–2.

[32] *Principles of Political Economy*, *CW* III, p. 950.

[33] See Dale E. Miller, "John Stuart Mill's Civic Liberalism," *History of Political Thought* 21 (2000), pp. 88–113.

person's time that no one could both develop his or her faculties and do socially productive work. This raises the specter that society would necessarily have to be divided between workers and "developers," as was true in the classical Greece that Mill so admires. Mill, however, would deny that this choice must be made. He believes that the "probable futurity" of the working class involves high wages, driven up by a low rate of reproduction, and worker-owned firms—if not the more elaborate forms of organizing work proposed by writers like Fourier and Saint-Simon. He believes that early experiences with cooperative firms show that work can be organized in ways that leave plenty of opportunity for development, and that a cooperative working experience itself can make an incredibly significant contribution to the enhancement of workers intellectual, moral, and aesthetic abilities.[34] (One might add on Mill's behalf that he did a pretty fair job of employing his own faculties while holding down a job at the East India Company.)

The final tenet is that there is nothing intrinsic to the activities required for the development of the distinctly human faculties that precludes everyone from taking part in them. It is not the case, for example, that developing one's faculties requires being in a position of dominance over others, so that it is impossible for everyone to do it. The opposite is in fact true; positions of dominance inhibit one's development, particularly the development of the moral faculty. Mill warns that "[S]ervitude, except when it actually brutalises, though corrupting to both, is less so to the slaves than to the slave-masters. It is wholesomer for the moral nature to be restrained, even by arbitrary power, than to be allowed to exercise arbitrary power without restraint."[35] More generally, the more highly developed the intellectual and aesthetic faculties of the people with whom one interacts, the more opportunities that one has to develop one's own capacities. The more people of cultivated faculties in one's society, the better one's own prospects for development. One implication that Mill draws from this general principle is that men's chances for development would be far better if the education of women were to be improved. "Even a really superior man almost always begins to deteriorate when he is habitually (as the phrase is) king of his company: and in his most habitual company the husband who has a wife inferior to him is always so."[36]

Worth bearing in mind here is that Mill does not think that a society in which everyone has the opportunity to develop us to his or her potential can be constructed quickly, not when the starting point resembles any society that actually has existed. He expects that it would take many generations, for "the future generation is educated by the present, and the imperfections of the teachers set an invincible limit to the degree in which they can train their pupils to be better than themselves."[37] There would

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[34] See Dale E. Miller, "Mill's 'Socialism,'" *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 2(2003), pp. 213–38.

[35] *Subjection of Women, CW* XXI, p. 321.

[36] *Subjection of Women*, *CW* XXI, p. 335.

[37] "Chapters on Socialism," *CW* V, p. 740.

necessarily be a long, slow, reciprocating process, in which social and political reforms are made, people's attitudes change a little as a result, these changes facilitate further reforms, and so on.

V. A Genuinely Happy Life for (Nearly) All

The thesis of the previous section was that Mill believes that in a properly organized society it will be possible for virtually everyone to develop their faculties to the point necessary in order for them to lead lives that are rich in higher quality pleasures. This means that virtually everyone could satisfy a necessary condition for a genuinely happy life. Now the question becomes that of why Mill believes that it would be possible for virtually everyone actually to lead such a life.

All that a person of developed faculties requires in order to enjoy a happy life are sufficient opportunities to employ those faculties and freedom from excessive amounts of pain. Mill has no worries about the first of these requirements being satisfied, in a properly ordered society; opportunities to exercise the higher faculties would not be hard to come by. Even if the members of such a society would find less "to correct and improve" than Mill did in Victorian England, they would still encounter "so much to interest [and] . . . enjoy." One has to expect that a society of well-developed individuals would have a thriving intellectual and artistic culture that would present people with far more opportunities to exercise these faculties than are available now, and that these would be assiduously seized. Even in the absence of such a thriving culture, the only thing that Mill believes can typically prevent a person with advanced faculties from finding opportunities to use them is being denied the liberty to "use the sources of happiness within his reach," which might happen as a result of either "bad laws, or subjection to the will of others."[38] In his day, obviously, he sees this as a real impediment to the happiness of those few individuals with cultivated faculties. The question now, though, is what he thinks would be possible in a society organized in the manner that he considers most desirable, and problems like a lack of liberty can safely be assumed to lie in such a society's distant past.

Also worth mentioning in this regard is Mill's belief that the mere possession of developed faculties can be a source of pleasure. This emerges when he invokes the notion of a sense of dignity to explain why individuals with developed faculties, no matter how discontented they are, would still not willingly give those faculties for any quantity of the lower pleasures.

> We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness . . .but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them.[39]

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[38] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 216.

[39] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 212.

This is another passage that has largely been ignored by commentators. The key to understanding it actually appears in Chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*, where Mill analyzes the love of virtue by saying that a person can come to take pleasure in the thought of being virtuous and to find the thought of being vicious painful.[40] Similarly, to possess a sense of dignity is to take pleasure in the thought that one has reached the level of development that one has and to find the thought of regressing in one's internal culture painful. This higher-quality pleasure results from the operation of the aesthetic faculty; it comes from an agent's appreciation of the degree of perfection that he or she has attained. At first glance, one might expect that the amount of happiness that a person derives from the consciousness that he or she has developed faculties would be proportional to how highly developed they are. This may not always hold true, though, for sometimes those who are most advanced might be most conscious of and troubled by their own inadequacies.

So in principle it should be possible for everyone of normal human capacities to enjoy lives that are rich in higher quality pleasures. The only thing that might stand between them and genuinely happy lives, therefore, would be severe suffering over an extended period of time. Yet Mill is certain that if moral and intellectual progress continue then it should eventually prove possible to reduce "[T]he positive evils of life, the great sources of physical and mental suffering—such as indigence, disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection."[41] Mill is not such a pie-in-the-sky optimist that he believes real suffering can ever entirely be eliminated from human life. Some people will always have to endure it, as a result of the vagaries of fortune. There is no distinct social group or class of whom this is true, however, but only random individuals. Nor is their suffering ever for anyone else's benefit.

Thus Mill believes that it ought to be possible, in the distant future, for societies to evolve to the point where virtually everyone can enjoy a genuinely happy life. Yet it is important not to have an exaggerated notion of what life in a society where virtually everyone enjoys a genuinely happy life would be like. One must not picture a state of complete harmony between individuals, and certainly one must not suppose that all of the inhabitants of such a society would have smiles on their faces during all of their waking hours. There would be economic competition, albeit mainly between worker-owned firms, and this means that there would be economic losers. A genuinely happy life does not require much by way of consumption, and Mill regards an excessive concern with material to be a sign of insufficient development. He is not one to spurn comfort, however, and he would have every expectation that those who fared less well in the market would be disappointed, even if their prospects for a genuinely happy life were not endangered. There would also be competition in the realm of ideas. Even if the social and political institutions and practices to be necessary for everyone to have a good chance to lead a genuinely happy life are regarded as constitutional "fixed points," which are "of course lawful to contest in theory, but which no one could either fear or

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[40] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, p. 237.

[41] *Utilitarianism*, *CW* X, pp. 216–7. Mill's reference to the premature loss of loved ones here is poignant, given that he was writing shortly after the death of Harriet.

hope to see shaken in practice," there would still be plenty of room for agonistic democratic politics.[42] So too would there be a marketplace of ideas about how people should order the self-regarding parts of their lives, even though the liberty principle, which would certainly be generally accepted, would keep these disagreements out of the political sphere. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that even though Mill hopes for a future in which everyone recognizes the value of development, this does not mean that he thinks they will all want to lead identical lives. There are many activities through which the higher pleasures can be enjoyed; in fact, almost any activity could potentially be a font of higher pleasures. So there would be ample scope for differences of taste. There would also be ample scope for serious disagreements between philosophies of life.[43]

In *Utilitarianism*, Mill introduces the distinction between happiness and contentment. The latter is, at least roughly, a function of how much happiness one enjoys relative to one's capacity for it. It takes far more, therefore, to render highly-developed beings content. In the kind of society that Mill hopes humanity will some day construct, populated with the kind of individuals whom he hopes humanity will some day produce, it still will not be true that everyone is content all of the time. Still, though, over the course of their lives, all of them will enjoy enough of the best and most valuable pleasures, and will have to endure a limited enough amount of suffering, that their time on Earth deserves to be called genuinely happy.

VI. Conclusion

As a way to pull this somewhat far-flung discussion together, I want to return to the question of those supposed counterexamples to utilitarianism in which maximizing happiness is supposed to depend on immiserating some for the greater benefit of others, when there is no necessity for anyone to be miserable. How might Mill answer these? His response would be to question whether such arrangements really are happiness-maximizing, in the long-run. Take a standard Philosophy 101 scenario, such as the enslavement of a relatively small group—say all left-handed redheads—so that they might serve everyone else. Maybe this scheme would maximize the gross national product, although probably not, but Mill would never be convinced that it maximized happiness. Slavery inhibits the intellectual development of slaves and the moral development of masters alike, and so—*pace* Aristotle—slavery is an all-around impediment to the enjoyment of genuine happiness. Something very similar might be said about the "Fordist" society depicted in *Brave New World*. With a few exceptions that might be eliminated through minor technological refinements, everyone in that society is content. From a Millian perspective, though, this comes at an exorbitant price in happiness. Betas through Gammas are prevented from developing their intellectual and aesthetic faculties, to various (and carefully calibrated) degrees, and everyone is

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[42] "Coleridge," *CW* X, p. 134.

[43] Those who read Mill along the lines suggested by Joseph Hamburger may dissent from this point; limitations of space prevent me from commenting on Hamburger's interpretation. See his *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

morally stunted. Of course, there can always be "mystical" examples, where we are simply told that this exchange is for the greatest happiness of humanity and no attempt beyond vague allusions to supernatural forces is made to explain why. One does not have to be as skeptical as Mill about the value of moral intuitions, though, to question whether our gut-level reaction to the implications that a moral theory might have in a universe completely unlike ours, peopled by beings completely unlike us, should give us any reason to reject it.

There is a danger in describing Mill as a 'utopian,' because 'utopia' can connote a sense of impossibility. Mill certainly did not consider himself a utopian in this sense. He took himself to be describing a very possible, albeit far-off, future for humanity, and indeed he seems to be reasonably confident that this future will in fact be achieved. He does not consider this certain, by any stretch—he is no Hegelian—but he is optimistic. The *OED*'s second definition of 'utopia,' following one that refers specifically to Sir Thomas More's island, is "A place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions."[44] It is in this sense that I am calling Mill a utopian, although even here it is necessary to insert qualifiers. He certainly does not believe that politics, laws, or customs will ever be absolutely perfect, nor does he think that conditions will ever be such that absolutely everyone can lead a genuinely happy—let alone a perfect—life. Still, Mill's vision of a society whose members all reach their developmental potential, and virtually all of whom manage to lead genuinely happy lives, is so far distant from where we are today that it still has a utopian quality to it. If it is not ideally perfect, it is still, as I noted in the introduction, as close to it as human society could ever possibly hope to come. It is close enough to absolute perfection that to many people it will still have an air of unreality. Admittedly, it is hard to share Mill's optimism that such a state will ever be reached. If the West has moved closer to it in some ways in the last hundred years, then it is probably further from it in others. Nevertheless, we ought to be powerfully attracted to Mill's vision, and if we cannot share his confidence then at least we can share his hope. And I hope we do.

[44] *Oxford English Dictionary* Online, visited 18 May 2006.