

MILL'S CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS*

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In this essay I shall attempt to show that there is a consistent conception of happiness to be gleaned from Mill's writings which is at great variance with the views commonly attributed to him. That conception is extremely subtle and complex, and is crucial to understanding Mill's positions on justice and freedom. Moreover, it suggests a very different conception of utilitarianism than these critics have contemplated, one according to which Mill's defense of liberty is utilitarian.

For a very long time, there was a fairly standard interpretation of the moral philosophy of John Stuart Mill, according to which he inherited doctrines from his father, James Mill, and from Jeremy Bentham, onto which he grafted other views not compatible with those of his mentors. Thus, unable to shake off his infantile security blanket, he could be charged with inconsistency and equivocation. Mill comes off as a good, kind, benevolent man, whose basic morality and humanness outstripped his moral theories, and, thus, as a morally admirable fathead.

Mill's conception of happiness—the central concept in his moral and political philosophy—is an example *par excellence* of the way in which his views have been maltreated by the philosophical community. The commonly accepted version of Mill's views goes somewhat as follows: Basically, Mill accepted the Benthamite doctrine that men are always and only motivated to act by a desire for pleasure; all actions are merely *means* to pleasure. Moreover, pleasure is the only thing which has value. Happiness, then, is conceived as a sum of pleasures, and is obtained when pleasures predominate over pains in one's life. Now, it is true (the accounts admit) that in *Utilitarianism*, Mill distinguishes higher and lower pleasures, but such a

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qualitative distinction among pleasures presupposes that something *other* than pleasure has value. Also (it is further admitted), Mill *does* claim that men desire things such as power, money, and virtue as parts of happiness, but, in claiming this, he is either mistakenly confusing the desire for, say, money, with a desire for pleasure, or he is contradicting his original claim, that men always and solely desire pleasure. Moreover, in applying his theories to political philosophy, especially in the defense of freedom, he must use *non*-utilitarian arguments, since he cannot show that respecting freedom always has a further consequence the maximization of pleasure.¹

Virtually no part of this interpretation is any longer universally accepted, and certain parts of it are quite widely rejected. Recent Mill scholarship has, indeed, made most of it suspect.² Nonetheless, the orthodox interpretation continues to dominate thinking about Mill.

Before beginning my argument, that Mill's writings do offer a consistent concept of happiness, I should issue three disavowals. First, I shall not try to show that the interpretations I offer are consistent with everything Mill wrote, not even in the essay *Utilitarianism*. Such a task is beyond the scope of this paper. Second, I should indicate that aspects of my interpretation are suggested by, or explicitly maintained by, other commentators on Mill.³ To the best of my knowledge, however, a sustained investigation of Mill's concept of happiness, along the lines I present, has not been done. Third, I shall not argue that the conception of happiness, and the resulting moral theory I shall attribute to Mill, are ultimately defensible. I think they are more defensible than those of the standard interpretation, but I do not think they will withstand all criticism. But, surely a proper understanding of the theory is a necessary prelude to fair criticism.

I

In this paper, I wish to demonstrate two important points:

(1) Mill did *not* hold the theory, usually attributed also to Bentham, that men desire or seek only pleasure; and

(2) Mill did *not* take pleasure, *simpliciter*, as the sole criterion of value, and then define happiness in terms of a sum of pleasures.

Thus, I shall reject the very foundations of standard interpretations of Mill on happiness.

The first proposition, that Mill did not think men are motivated solely by desires for pleasure, is actually very easy to demonstrate, because Mill explicitly rejected that view in a number of places in his writings. Some twenty-eight years prior to the publication of his essay *Utilitarianism*, Mill wrote a critical study of Bentham's moral and jurisprudential thought, entitled "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy." One of Mill's chief criticisms involved the claim that Bentham's conception of human nature, and, hence, of human motivation, was too narrow:

That the actions of sentient beings are wholly determined by pleasure and pain, is the fundamental principle from which he starts. . . . Now if this only means what was before asserted, that our actions are determined by pleasure and pain, that simple and unambiguous mode of stating the proposition is preferable. But under cover of the obscurer phrase a meaning creeps in, both to the author's mind and the reader's which goes much farther, and is entirely false: that all our acts are determined by pains and pleasures *in prospect*, pains and pleasures to which we look forward as the *consequences* of our acts. This, as a universal truth, can in no way be maintained. The pain or pleasure which determines our conduct is as frequently one which *precedes* the moment of action as one which follows it. . . .the case *may* be, and is to the full as likely to be, that he [a man] recoils from the very thought of committing the act; the idea of placing himself in such a situation is so painful, that he cannot dwell upon it long enough to have even the physical power of perpetrating the crime. His conduct is determined by pain; but by a pain which precedes the act, not by one which is expected to follow it. Not only *may* this be so, but unless it be so, the man is not really virtuous. The fear of pain *consequent* upon the act, cannot arise, unless there be *deliberation*. . . . With what propriety shrinking from an action without deliberation, can be called yielding to an *interest*, I cannot see. *Interest* surely conveys, and is intended to convey, the idea of an *end*, to which the conduct (whether it be act or forbearance) is designed as the *means*. Nothing of this sort takes place in the above example. It would be more correct to say that conduct is *sometimes* determined by an *interest*, that is, by a deliberate and conscious aim; and sometimes by an *impulse*, that is by a feeling (call it an association if you think fit) which has no ulterior end, the act or forbearance becoming an end in itself.⁴

In the essay, Mill continued with a criticism of Bentham's attempt to catalogue human motives:

The attempt, again, to *enumerate* motives, that is, human desires and aversions, seems to me to be in its very conception an error. *Motives are innumerable*:

there is nothing whatever which may not become an object of desire or of dislike by association. It may be desirable to distinguish by peculiar notice the motives which are strongest and of most frequent operation; but Mr. Bentham has not even done this. In his list of motives, though he includes sympathy, he omits conscience, or the feeling of duty: one would never imagine from reading him that any human being ever did an act merely because it is right, or abstained from it merely because it is wrong.⁵

In these passages, Mill seems to be saying that actions are *caused* by pleasures or pains, either the pleasure or pain anticipated as *resulting* from the act, or the pleasure or pain induced by the very thought of doing the act. In the latter case, that which is desired—the doing or not doing of an act—is not a pleasure anticipated as resulting from action, and Mill explicitly asserted that in this case there is no ulterior motive beyond the action or forbearance which is sought. The claim that Mill endorses here, that all actions are *caused* by pleasures or pain is not equivalent to the claim that men desire or seek only pleasure. These claims may be equally false; they are not, however, identical.

Now, this denial by Mill of the statement that men desire only pleasure, and all other things only as means to pleasure, was not an idiosyncratic occurrence. I shall cite several other places in which Mill not only rejected the view, but went on to offer an account of how, even if we originally desired only pleasure, we could come to desire other things without regard for pleasure, but for their own sakes. Nor can these passages be explained away as examples of Mill's eclecticism, the worst form of which (it is sometimes alleged) is manifested in his attempts to embrace several inconsistent doctrines. The fact is that I can find no place in which Mill ever explicitly expressed a contrary view. At most, there are several passages in *Utilitarianism* which *could* be read as asserting the contrary doctrine. As these are also explainable in terms of the alternative doctrine expressed in many places, these passages provide little ground for a serious scholar to impute to Mill the view that men desire or seek only pleasure.

Let us look further at the evidence. In 1838, Mill wrote another essay assessing Bentham's work, bearing the title, "Bentham." Again, he complained of Bentham's too narrow conception of human nature and human motivation. His criticisms were essentially the same as those of the earlier essay.⁶

A few years after this, in 1843, Mill's *A System of Logic* was published. There, he maintained the view of human motivation out-

lined in the essays on Bentham, and went on to explain how we could come to desire things other than pleasures and the avoidance of pains, even if, originally, that is all we desire. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill refers the reader to this passage in the *Logic* which expresses his view concerning human motives:

When the will is said to be determined by motives, a motive does not mean always, or solely, the anticipation of a pleasure or of a pain. I shall not here inquire whether it be true that, in the commencement, all voluntary actions are mere means consciously employed to obtain some pleasure or avoid some pain. It is at least certain that we gradually, through the influence of association, come to desire the means without thinking of the end: the action itself becomes an object of desire, and is performed without reference to any motive beyond itself. Thus far, it may still be objected, that the action having through association become pleasurable, we are, as much as before, moved to act by the anticipation of a pleasure, namely the pleasure of the action itself. But granting this, the matter does not end here. As we proceed in the formation of habits, and become accustomed to will a particular course of conduct because it is pleasurable, we at last continue to will it without any reference to its being pleasurable. Although, from some change in us or in our circumstances, we have ceased to find any pleasure in the action, or perhaps to anticipate any pleasure as the consequence of it, we still continue to desire the action, and consequently to do it. . . . A habit of willing is commonly called a purpose; and among the causes of our volitions, and of the actions which flow from them, must be reckoned not only likings and aversions, but also purposes. It is only when our purposes have become independent of the feelings of pain or pleasure from which they originally took their rise that we are said to have a confirmed character.⁷

Finally, I would cite a footnote appended by Mill to an edition he published in 1869 (*after* the publication of his own essay *Utilitarianism*) of his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*. In the footnote he points out (again) how various things not themselves pleasures come to be desired "for their own sake, without reference to their consequences," by being so closely associated with pleasures.⁸

Oddly enough, the only places of which I am aware in which Mill might be taken as asserting that men desire only pleasure, or are motivated solely by desires for pleasures, are to be found in *Utilitarianism*. As this is the work which most commentators have dealt with exclusively, it is somewhat understandable that this view, explicitly rejected by Mill elsewhere, might be attributed to him by such critics. To begin with, Mill described the Principle of Utility in this way:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.⁹

Later, Mill attempted his famous “proof” of the Principle of Utility, in which he asserted that each man desires his own happiness. He then seems to try to show that nothing else is desired, i.e., that anything else desired is desired as a part of happiness. With regard to the desire of virtue, Mill held:

It results from the preceding considerations, that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. Those who desire virtue for its own sake, desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united; as in truth the pleasure and pain seldom exist separately, but almost always together, the same person feeling pleasure in the degree of virtue attained, and pain in not having attained more. If one of these gave him no pleasure, and the other no pain, he would not love or desire virtue, or would desire it only for the other benefits which it might produce to himself or to persons whom he cared for.¹⁰

To the reader unfamiliar with Mill’s other work, it might appear from these passages (and several others in the essay) that Mill maintained the following:

- (1) Men desire only happiness.
- (2) Happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain, thus, men desire only pleasure.
- (3) All other things desired are desired *for* the pleasure in them, i.e., it is the pleasure to be had *from* them which is desired, and the things themselves are not the object of desire.

Now if one thinks of Mill as having asserted (1)-(3), then the following passage must seem to be a mere inconsistency:

But does the utilitarian doctrine deny that people desire virtue, or maintain that virtue is not a thing to be desired? The very reverse. It maintains not only that virtue is to be desired, but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself. Whatever may be the opinion of utilitarian moralists as to the original conditions by which virtue is made virtue; however they may believe (as they do) that actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue; yet this being granted, and it having been decided, from considerations of this description, what is virtuous, they not only place virtue at the very head of things which are good as means to the ultimate end, but they also recognize as a psychological fact the possibility of its being, to the individual, a good in itself, without looking to any end beyond it; and hold, that the mind is not in a right state, not in a state conformable to Utility, not in the state most conducive to the general happiness, unless it does love virtue in this manner—as a thing desirable in itself, even although, in the individual instance, it should not produce those other desirable consequences which it tends to produce, and on account of which it is held to be virtue. This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the Happiness principle.¹¹

Mill *cannot* hold, as he does in this passage, that virtue, or anything else, is sought for its own sake, *if* it is the pleasure to be had *from* it which is sought. In *Utilitarianism*, however, Mill nowhere says it is the pleasure to be gotten from virtue which is sought. Though virtue would not be sought if it did not at some stage provide pleasure, it does not follow that pleasure is the object of the desire for virtue. Indeed, he explained the development of desires for things in themselves in the same associationist manner he employed elsewhere. The desire for money, he points out, is one of the strongest motives. Indeed, in the case of neurotic misers, it has been so associated with pleasure that its mere possession is desired. But, in such a case, that which is desired, though not sought for the sake of an end to be attained through it, has now become part of the end—the person thinks he would be unhappy without it:

The desire of it is not a different thing from the desire of happiness, any more than the love of music or the desire of health. They are included in happiness. They are some of the elements of which the desire of happiness is made up. Happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts.¹²

And, in a later paragraph:

So obvious does this appear to me, that I expect it will hardly be disputed: and the objection made will be, not that desire can possibly be directed to any-

thing ultimately except pleasure and exemption from pain, but that the will is a different thing from desire; that a person of confirmed virtue, or any other person whose purposes are fixed, carries out his purposes without any thought of the pleasure he has in contemplating them, or expects to derive from their fulfillment; and persists in acting on them, even though these pleasures are much diminished, by changes in his character or decay of his passive sensibilities, or are outweighed by the pains which the pursuit of the purposes may bring upon him. All this I fully admit, and have stated it elsewhere [the reference is to the previously quoted paragraph in the *Logic*], as positively and as emphatically as any one. Will, the active phenomenon, is a different thing from desire, the state of passive sensibility, and though originally an offshoot from it, may in time take root and detach itself from the parent stock; so much so, that in the case of an habitual purpose, instead of willing the thing because we desire it, we often desire it only because we will it.¹³

Now these passages are entirely in keeping with the views we have seen Mill expressing elsewhere. Moreover, they go some way toward helping us understand the passages in which Mill seemed to be expressing the view that men desire only pleasure.

First, let us recall that Mill held that what *causes* us to desire anything is either the pleasure of it, or the pleasantness of the idea of it. Now, because of repeated association, we can *come* to desire something not in itself pleasant; the same process of association with pleasure results in the idea of it being pleasant. Now, finding the thought pleasant, and being thereby caused to desire it, is not the same thing as desiring the pleasure, either of the idea, or of the thing, once obtained. It is (according to Mill) a desire for the thing, caused by the pleasantness of the idea of it. So, while it is always pleasure which causes our desire, our desire is not always a desire for pleasure. Thus, when Mill says that virtue is desired because the idea of it is pleasurable, and that one would not desire it if it gave him no pleasure, he is remarking about the psychological formation and causation of the desire, not about the object of the desire. Now, the will is normally the result of desires. However, habitual acts of will can become dissociated from pleasure, done even when no pleasure, either immediate or anticipated, is involved. In that case, the acts come to be desired only because willed. This latter case does compromise somewhat the claim that all desires are caused by pleasure, but even here, Mill is quick to point out that the desire owes its origin to pleasure. Of course, despite its *origin*, the desire is not a desire for pleasure.¹⁴

Now, with the exception of these cases of habitual willing,

where pleasure is no longer associated with the doing of the willed acts (and of desiring something merely as a means to another end), it will be the case that something is desired if, and only if, it is thought pleasant. Moreover, a thing with which we have come to associate pleasure, and thus the thought of which is pleasant, may come to take great hold on us, so that we think we would be happy with it, unhappy without it. It is in this sense that one desires it *as a part* of happiness. What *causes* the desire for it now is the pain of the thought of being without it, and the pleasantness of the thought of obtaining it. Moreover (though there are serious problems with this claim), our desires for these things are part of what is involved in desiring our happiness, i.e., we desire happiness if, and only if, we desire all the things which we believe are required for our happiness. Happiness is not some *further* object to be had as a result or product of obtaining these. These *are* pleasures to us, and happiness consists in their attainment. To desire something as part of happiness does not require that one desires it *thinking* of it *as* a part of his happiness. Thus, though Mill did not always make this clear, in acting from desires for these things, it is not necessary that any immediate thought be given to happiness. A person may have come to habitually desire certain things (e.g., doing virtuous acts) as requisites for his well-being, so that in his subsequent behavior, he straightaway does the right thing as soon as his circumstances are realized, without any further thought of happiness. Though no thought is given to happiness, desiring these things is not something different from desiring happiness.

Do these explanations suffice, however, to account for the passage in which Mill described the Greatest Happiness Principle? He there said that "pleasure and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends," and he further stated that "by happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain." Not only do our explanations seem inadequate to handle this passage, the passage seems to support the second claim I am arguing against, viz., that Mill defined happiness as the accumulation of pleasure. Following this passage is Mill's attempt to distinguish higher and lower pleasures, and he thereby appears to run into trouble. Because he asserted that pleasure is the only thing desirable as an end, his critics hold him to be inconsistent for going on to regard some pleasures as more valuable than others, since whatever property or properties serve as the basis for

the qualitative distinction cannot also be pleasures.

I shall leave open the question of whether this line, commonly attributed to Mill, really is inconsistent. I wish to argue, instead, for an interpretation that avoids that issue entirely. It will also help bring the passage in question in line with my attempts to show that Mill did not hold that we seek only pleasure in all we do.¹⁵

It is instructive to begin with the very paragraph in which Mill said that “by happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain.” The sentence which follows it is almost universally ignored in the literature. It reads: “To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question.” Now, if Mill meant to define happiness *merely* by saying it is pleasure, it is not clear that anything more needs to be said at all. For the most part, we have little doubt in our minds what pleasures and pains are. We recognize them easily. And, in what follows, Mill makes no attempt to provide a *philosophical* analysis of the notions of pain and pleasure; those notions are taken as perfectly clear.¹⁶ It is not in that respect that he goes on to attempt to clarify what is included in the idea of pleasure or of pain. If one looks closely at Mill’s discussion, it seems more accurate to say that, rather than analyzing the concepts of pleasure and pain, Mill presented an analysis of the notion of *happiness* with which he was working, thereby indicating what, in the way of pleasures, was included in that idea. Happiness, he indicated is *composed* of pleasures, but not *every* composite of pleasures which outweigh accompanying pains constitutes happiness. Mill may have thought that all pleasures have intrinsic value, and all pains disvalue; he almost certainly held that not all pleasures are equally valuable *when considered in relation to their possessor’s happiness*.¹⁷

Thus, the paragraph in question, in which Mill described his Greatest Happiness Principle, was *not* his final definition of ‘happiness’. It was only a preliminary outline of the conception, in need of fleshing out before it could be ultimately accepted.

Now, if this account truly captures the logic of Mill’s discussion, it is true—but seriously misleading—to say that he held that pleasure is the only thing of value. It would be more accurate to say that happiness is what has value, or that it is pleasure *in so far as it is a constituent of a person’s happiness which has value*. (It should be

remembered that it is entirely open to a utilitarian to ascribe value to whatever he thinks is valuable. In order to be consistently a utilitarian, his theory of what acts are *right* must take a certain form, but anything at all may be taken as having value.)

The conception of value I have outlined puts Mill's discussion of higher and lower pleasures in a very different light. If I am right, then Mill would have been arguing that some pleasures are more crucial to happiness than others, and *thus* more valuable. And, indeed, it seems to me that this is precisely the form Mill's argument took. In answer to the charge that Epicureans and others who hold that pleasure is man's ultimate goal maintain a doctrine fit only for swine, Mill replied:

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then no longer be an imputation; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification.¹⁸

Now, Mill went on to hold that some pleasures are inherently more valuable than others, and he offered his famous test for the superiority of pleasures. The test consists in consulting those who have experienced competing pleasures, who have the capacity to enjoy and appreciate them; and if such persons prefer one over others, even if it is also "attended with a greater amount of discontent," then it is superior in quality. In his following paragraph, Mill claimed that there *are* such pleasures—those which are involved in the fulfillment of man's higher faculties. For the most part, men are *not* happy without the fulfillment of those capacities; they will not give up those needs in exchange for maximum fulfillment of more animal-like desires.¹⁹

It is usually considered generous to Mill to ignore the paragraphs cited, or to downgrade their significance in one way or an-

other. He cannot, it is thought, literally *define* higher pleasures as those which would be chosen in the way indicated. And, of course, that much is true; at best, he has given a rough *test*, not the very *meaning* of the expression "higher pleasures." These passages are important, however, because they indicate an important feature of the choice process, viz., the basis on which a competent judge would select some pleasures over others, or the significance of his choice. The ground is, of course, his sense that some pleasures are requisite for his happiness, while others are not. And, who would be a better judge as to which of two pleasures is requisite for the happiness of creatures with certain capacities except someone with those capacities who has experienced those pleasures? Mill is clearly asserting in these passages that not just any accumulation of pleasures will make a man happy, and, thus, happiness cannot consist merely in the accumulation of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Indeed, it is only at *this* point that Mill indicates his *ultimate* definition of happiness, or of the Greatest Happiness Principle, in which it is clear that the ultimate end sought is happiness, conceived as made up of pleasures, but *not* indiscriminately compounded. The later definition reads:

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable . . . is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality.²⁰

There is an extremely important consequence of this conception: In this conception, human happiness is not an open concept in the sense that it consists of pleasures completely unspecified. Mill's concept of happiness is partly determinate in the sense that there are *particular* elements requisite to it. It is partially open in the sense that an indeterminate number of things *can come to be* seen as elements in a person's happiness. *Human* well-being—given human capacities—requires some particular elements, and may come to require many others which cannot be specified ahead of time. (Recall that in the paragraph in which Mill first described the Greatest Happiness Principle, he indicated that to some extent what is included "in the

ideas of pain and pleasure," is left "an open question.")

If this is a correct view of Mill, we should be able to indicate the permanent aspects of happiness. Moreover, doing so will bring out the fullness of Mill's conception of happiness. In the last passages cited above, Mill asserted:

A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and is certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable; we may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power, or to the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it: 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.²¹

Here, Mill was asserting that the requisites of happiness include a sense of one's independence and self-determination, a sense of power, of freedom, a measure of excitement, and, described generally, whatever is necessary to maintain human dignity.

There are other parts of the essay in which Mill elaborated his conception of happiness. For example, in his discussion of rights and justice, he wrote:

To have a right, then, is, I conceive, to have something which society ought to defend me in the possession of. If the objector goes on to ask why it ought, I can give no other reason than general utility. . . . The interest involved is that of security, to everyone's feelings the most vital of all interests. Nearly all other earthly benefits are needed by one person, not needed by another; and many of them can, if necessary, be cheerfully foregone, or replaced by something else; but security no human being can possibly do without; on it we depend for all our immunity from evil, and for the whole value of all and every good, beyond the passing moment; since nothing but the gratification of the instant could be of any worth to us, if we could be deprived of everything the next instant by whoever was momentarily stronger than ourselves. Now this most indispensable of all necessities, after physical nutriment, cannot be had, unless the machinery for providing it is kept unintermittedly in active play.²²

Whatever else he claimed in this passage, Mill was asserting that security (and perhaps the sense of it) is crucial to happiness, and that rights are a device which ensure security; thus, respect for rights occupies a high place on the list of duties. And this is the mode of Mill's defense of the importance of the rules of justice:

Justice is a name for certain classes of moral rules, which concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly, and are therefore of more absolute obligation, than any other rules for the guidance of life; and the notion which we have found to be of the essence of the idea of justice, that of a right residing in an individual, implies and testifies to this more binding obligation.²³

Particular rules of justice were defended by Mill on grounds of their connection with maintaining what, loosely speaking, may be termed one's sense of security:

The important rank, among human evils and wrongs, of the disappointment of expectation, is shown in the fact that it constitutes the principal criminality of two such highly immoral acts as a breach of friendship and a breach of promise. Few hurts which human beings can sustain are greater, and none wound more, than when that on which they habitually and with full assurance relied, fails them in the hour of need; and few wrongs are greater than this mere withholding of good; none excite more resentment either in the person suffering, or in a sympathizing spectator.²⁴

From these passages (and others in the essay *On Liberty*), we can describe Mill's conception of the essential elements of human happiness. Roughly they divide into two related categories. First, are the constituents and requirements for an individual's sense of being his own man, developing his life as he chooses—a sense of freedom, power, excitement, etc. Second, are those things requisite for a sense of security, the prime ones being the fulfillment by others of the rules of justice, and their respect for our rights. These are related, and overlapping, of course, because foremost among the rules of justice are those that prescribe respect for freedom. To this description must be added Mill's endorsement of Von Humboldt's conception of happiness in chapter III of *On Liberty*. The additional element brought in here is the notion of a harmonious ordering and arrangement of the elements of a personality, fully developed in its capabilities and powers.

Now, it is important to bear in mind that Mill described a way in which other elements come to be regarded as requisites of one's

happiness. We have already seen that Mill recognized that virtually anything, or any mode of behavior, can come to be desired in such a way that failure to obtain it is viewed as a diminution of one's happiness. This will mean that happiness (or one's conception of it) consists of two kinds of required aspects or elements: (a) those requisites associated with being *human*, with certain human capabilities, needs, and requirements, (b) those elements which are *acquired* requisites for one's happiness. Into the latter category would go the fulfillment of the desire for virtue *when* virtue has come to be sought for its own sake.

Now, both kinds of goods—the “natural” requisites of happiness, and those which are acquired—can be desired for their own sakes; but for Mill this did *not* entail that they are equally *worthy* of pursuit. At least, this does not follow if it is taken to mean that both kinds of goods are *intrinsically* valuable. I wish to show that Mill thought it to be the first group of goods which controls, in that other ends, including ones which have come to be parts of one's conception of happiness, ought to be sought only if they do not conflict with the basic elements of happiness, only if they do promote it.

As we have seen, Mill considered it possible to desire a number of kinds of things for their own sakes—virtue, money, power, by the process of association with pleasure. He adds, however, that there is an important difference between virtue and the others, viz., that the desires for the others may be injurious to happiness by making the person obnoxious, while this is not possible with respect to virtue. Thus:

the utilitarian standard, while it tolerates and approves those other acquired desires, up to the point beyond which they would be more injurious to the general happiness than promotive of it, enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to the greatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness.²⁵

Even with respect to virtue, however, what justifies making it an end in itself is the contribution of a virtuous state of character to the general welfare. Mill urged the inculcation of the desire to be virtuous for its own sake, and urged the formation of character in which being virtuous is among one's “fixed purposes,” and virtuous action has become a matter of confirmed character. Ultimately, the actions come under the control of habit, and do not spring from an experi-

ence of a pleasurable thought, or from the anticipation of a pleasure. The only thing which could justify the continuance of such habitual desiring, and its general inculcation, would be its contribution to happiness, but happiness defined independently of any reference to virtuous action. Indeed, Mill held:

That which is the result of habit affords no presumption of being intrinsically good; and there would be no reason for wishing that the purpose of virtue should become independent of pleasure and pain, were it not that the influence of the pleasurable and painful associations which prompt to virtue is not sufficiently to be depended on for unerring constancy of action until it has acquired the support of habit. Both in feeling and in conduct, habit is the only thing which imparts certainty; and it is because of the importance to others of being able to rely absolutely on one's feelings and conduct, and to oneself of being able to rely on one's own, that the will to do right ought to be cultivated into this habitual independence. In other words, this state of the will is a means to good, not intrinsically a good; and does not contradict the doctrine that nothing is a good to human beings but in so far as it is either itself pleasurable, or a means of attaining pleasure or averting pain.²⁶

What follows from this analysis is that not everything desired for its own sake is intrinsically desirable; also, we should seek to inculcate desires for some things for their own sakes, because the existence of such desires contributes to the general welfare. Thus, I conclude, the ultimate criterion of the value of all actions, and also of all desires for doing actions, is what is requisite for the happiness of man *as a creature of elevated faculties*. In the second, and subsequent editions of the *Logic*, Mill included a paragraph explaining that ends other than happiness should be sought; and that, in particular, the desire to perform virtuous acts without further consideration of happiness should be inculcated in people. He added:

The character itself should be, to the individual, a paramount end, simply because the existence of this ideal nobleness of character, or of the near approach to it, in any abundance, would go further than all things else towards making human life happy, both in the comparatively humble sense of pleasure and freedom from pain, and in the higher meaning of rendering life, not what it now is almost universally, puerile and insignificant, but such as human beings with highly developed faculties can care to have.²⁷

Moreover, the essay *On Liberty* will be misunderstood if this point is not grasped. Mill explained quite early in that work: "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be

utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."²⁸ And, the first part of chapter III, entitled, "Of Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being," is a quite explicit attempt to outline some of the basic components of such a conception of happiness, including Mill's endorsement of Von Humboldt's statement of the "end" of mankind as consisting in the full and harmonious development of man's powers and capabilities.

There is one final point I wish to make, even if it cannot be developed fully. Mill is sometimes criticized as having an "atomistic" conception of society—society is a composite of individual "atoms," and social interests just are a mathematical function of individual interests. But, in *Utilitarianism* and elsewhere, Mill denied this. In the much neglected chapter III of *Utilitarianism*, Mill speaks of a "powerful natural sentiment" in men—"the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures." Not only is this a natural desire, it is reinforced by the influences of social progress, so much so that men never even conceive themselves as other than members of a social body. Thus, through natural and artificial influences, and their sympathy with others, men come to regard the interests of others as among *their* interests, culminating in an ideal utilitarian society in which men do not desire for themselves benefits which cannot be shared by others. There are many aspects of Mill's moral and political philosophy which are illuminated by stress on the role of the "social feelings" in man, the fulfillment of which is requisite for men's happiness. To cite just one very important example, part of the justification Mill gives in *On Liberty* for interference with conduct which can harm others is that "to be held to rigid rules of justice for the sake of others, develops the feelings and capacities which have the good of others for their object."²⁹

In the following section, I shall discuss some special problems presented by my interpretation of Mill.

II

The interpretation presented above will prompt the question of how the account fits in with Mill's famous "proof" of the Principle of Utility. I believe I have shown that Mill consistently maintained

that men do not always give thought to happiness or pleasure as the object of all their voluntary acts. In *Utilitarianism*, he held that men *can* and *should* desire the doing of virtuous acts without giving thought to further consequences. But, in his "proof," he seems to be trying to show that only happiness is fit to be the end and test of morality because *only* happiness is sought (or is capable of being sought) without regard for an end beyond itself. Now, the notion of acts done without any regard to happiness—those made part of our confirmed character through the development of habitual willing—seems to be a counter-example to the claim that only happiness is (or is capable of being) sought. It *may* be that Mill thought that in these cases, the desire to do these acts really *is* part of the desire for happiness, even though in acting from such desires no thought is actually given to happiness. At least it seems from the text that he thought this *sometimes* the case, i.e., when we have reached that point where the not doing of such acts (or the *idea* of not doing them) is sufficiently painful that we cannot be satisfied without doing them; we conceive our happiness as bound up with acting in this way. Happiness might, in some sense, be regarded the *ultimate* object of the desires to do these acts. In *Utilitarianism*, the penultimate paragraph of chapter IV and the one preceding it suggest a different interpretation, however (at least for those habitual willings that have become entirely independent of pleasant or painful thoughts), which would have important consequences for the interpretation of the proof. What is suggested is this: Mill *did* regard the class of acts done from habit as containing possible counter-examples to the claim that only happiness is desired or sought. He did not, however, think this admission undercut the claim of happiness as the end fit to be the test of morality. As he argued in that paragraph, *these* are cases of ends sought *out of habit alone*, which fact disqualifies them as candidates for that which is intrinsically good. Though these are not ends sought for the sake of something else, they are not sought *for the value in or of them*. So, the admitted exception to the claim in the premises does not undercut the conclusion of the proof. Now, if this, or something like it does capture accurately Mill's conception of the elements in his proof, he certainly did not bring this out clearly.

Second, Mill is unclear as to what he means by 'desires happiness'. He suggests that desiring happiness consists in desiring the things or elements which comprise one's happiness. But he seems to

leave it open that men do not desire happiness as he (Mill) conceives it, i.e., with the particular elements and weightings among them which he gives. Unreflective men may not view intellectual development, or self-determination, as requisite beyond a minimal degree for their happiness, and therefore, may have no great desire for these. Similarly, someone may desire something, i.e., wealth, *thinking* it requisite for his happiness, when it is not. In either case, desiring happiness does not seem to be the same as desiring the elements of happiness, at least not as Mill defined happiness as the end or test of morality. So, either men do not always desire happiness, or they do not always desire happiness as Mill conceived it, or both. Thus, even if we except acts done by virtue of being habitual, it is not clear that Mill *did* show that happiness, *as he conceived it*, is fit to be the test of morality, because it is the only thing men are capable of pursuing for its own sake.³⁰

Finally, and perhaps most seriously, Mill leaves it unclear how to resolve conflicts *among* the elements of happiness, e.g., when acting may increase freedom but detract from security, or vice versa. All we can do is look to writings such as the essay *On Liberty* to see how, in fact, he weighed these elements in practice.³¹ One aspect of this problem which the present analysis brings out, however, is that the problem is not *merely* one of efficiency, i.e., how to maximize the achievement of the various separate elements of happiness. The problem is also one which Mill's theory of *value* must face—what combinations and weightings are intrinsically good, or *constitutive* of human happiness. If happiness is conceived as requiring freedom as an essential *ingredient*, then *no* amount of security which destroys freedom can produce happiness. Similarly, if dignity is an essential ingredient of happiness, then increases in power which result in domination, or discriminatory treatment which degrades individuals, will necessarily decrease human well-being in one dimension. That Mill was insufficiently alive to the difficulties involved in conflicts among the elements of happiness, is clear enough. But I hope it is now equally clear that Mill's critics have failed to see that his theory of what is intrinsically valuable (sense of dignity, freedom, self-determination), does not imply some of the worst consequences which they have complained it committed him to accept.

To fully detail the implications of this analysis of happiness would require extended discussion of such topics as Mill's treatment

of the rules of justice and the defense of freedom. With respect to the latter, it is fairly clear that the essay *On Liberty* is a defense of freedom both as an *intrinsic* good—an essential ingredient of human happiness—and as productive of other goods. Such a two-fold defense is open to him using the analysis of happiness which I have attempted to outline. Moreover, we have seen that his treatment of justice is based on his claim that the rules of justice “concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly . . . than any other rules for the guidance of life.” In both cases, Mill’s most important and philosophically sound insights would be inexplicable if he held happiness definable in terms of pleasures *simpliciter*, while a perfectly consistent, sophisticated doctrine can be derived from the conception I have indicated. There are serious problems with that view, also, but they are different in kind from those which plague Mill on the traditional interpretation. To my mind, that is a point in favor of my interpretation of Mill; it preserves his status as a philosopher worthy of being taken seriously.

¹The interested reader may consult the following (among numerous others), as illustrations of critical interpretations of this sort: T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1969), pp. 168-78; George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (London: George G. Harrap, 1963), pp. 705-09; H. J. McCloskey, *John Stuart Mill: A Critical Study* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 58-72.

²The journal literature is too voluminous to mention. Among the better book-length works are: J. M. Robson, *The Improvement of Mankind: The Social and Political Thought of John Stuart Mill* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1968); and Alan Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

³Much of what I say of the psychological basis of Mill’s theory is anticipated in two articles: Maurice Mandelbaum, “On Interpreting Mill’s *Utilitarianism*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* VI (1968), pp. 35-46; and G. W. Spence, “The Psychology Behind J. S. Mill’s ‘Proof’,” *Philosophy* XLIII (January, 1968), 18-28. As there are aspects of my interpretation which go beyond their work, I feel justified in overlapping their contributions. Similarly, there are anticipations of my account of the relation between happiness and freedom in a number of places. See, especially, C. L. Ten, “Mill on Self-Regarding Actions,” *Philosophy* XLIII (January, 1968), 29-37.

⁴“Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” in *Collected Works*, X (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 12-13. (Mill’s *Collected Works*, X will hereafter be abbreviated as *CW*.)

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 13. Italics added in second sentence.

⁶Mill wrote:

Man is never recognized by him as a being capable of pursuing spiritual perfection as an end; of desiring, for its own sake, the conformity of his own character to his standard of excellence, without hope of good or fear of evil from other source than his own inward consciousness. Even in the more limited form of conscience, this great fact in human nature escapes him. . . . Nor is it only the moral part of man's nature, in the strict sense of the term—the desire for perfection, or the feeling of an approving or of an accusing conscience—that he overlooks; he but faintly recognizes, as a fact of human nature, the pursuit of any other ideal end for its own sake. The sense of *honour*, and personal dignity—that feeling of personal exaltation and degradation which acts independently of other people's opinion, or even in defiance to it; the love of *beauty*, the passion of the artist; the love of *order*, of congruity, of consistency in all things, and conformity to their end; the love of *power*, not in the limited form of power over other human beings, but abstract power, the power of making our volitions effectual; the love of *action*, the thirst for movement and activity, a principle scarcely of less influence in human life than its opposite, the love of ease. (*CW*, pp. 95-6)

⁷*A System of Logic* (London: Longman's, 1961), pp. 551-52.

⁸James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, ed. with add. notes by John Stuart Mill (London: Longman's, 1869), pp. 307-08.

⁹*CW*, p. 210.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 236.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁴There is a certain lack of clarity in what Mill wrote. He did say such acts are *desired* because willed, but his language also suggests that no *true* desire is involved. Earlier, he had written that "desiring a thing and finding it pleasant . . . [are] two different modes of naming the same psychological fact." (*CW*, p 237.) His father had written:

The term 'Idea of a pleasure,' expresses precisely the same thing as the term, Desire. It does so by the very import of the words. The idea of a pleasure, is the idea of something as good to have. . . . The terms, therefore, 'idea of a pleasure,' and 'desire,' are but two names; the thing named, the state of consciousness, is one and the same. (*Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, pp. 191-92.)

The younger Mill, however, *rejected* his father's account, claiming that desire is "the initiatory stage of Will," including a tendency to act, along with the idea of a pleasure. (*Analysis*, pp. 194-95.) It would be a short step to take to hold that an impetus to act which is the result of the force of habitual desiring is a limiting case of desire. I do not believe that Mill ever fully removed the apparent contradiction between: (a) desiring something just is thinking of it as pleasant, and (b)

cases of habitual willing involve desiring something because willed, *without* any thought or sense of pleasure. It *may* be that he was groping to maintain (a), while dropping the idea that a desire is involved in habitual willings. He may have been maintaining (what he virtually says in some places) that actions are sometimes produced by motives *other* than desires, e.g., by “fixed purposes.” Thus, pleasure would be inextricably associated with desire, but not the only object of volitions, not the only thing sought. I believe that something like this is maintained by G. W. Spence, in an important contribution to Mill scholarship (Cf., “The Psychology Behind J. S. Mill’s Proof,” *Philosophy*, XLIII [January, 1968], 18-28). However, the passages Spence cites, taken with other passages in Mill, do not unequivocally support such an interpretation. It is *also* possible that Mill was maintaining that habitual acts are desired, but not for their own sakes, i.e., only out of habit. This would explain, in part, Mill’s statement to the effect that nothing is a good to a man unless it is pleasurable, goods being those things desired for their own sakes. *If* one of these interpretations is correct, my claim will still stand up that Mill did not hold that men always *seek* pleasure as the object of all their actions.

¹⁵ It is possible that Mill did not consistently hold only one view as to the nature of the ultimate criterion of value. He may have been caught up with the notion that pleasure alone has value, and, having said that, thought he could consistently go on to make qualitative distinctions among pleasures. *Were* that the case, there is *also* a more sophisticated doctrine to be found in Mill’s work, which, to a certain extent, avoids the problems of the other one. A defense of the consistency of Mill’s distinction, even on traditional interpretations, is to be found in: Norman O. Dahl, “Is Mill’s Hedonism Inconsistent?” in *Studies in Ethics*, American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph Series (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), pp. 37-54. See also, Rex Martin, “A Defense of Mill’s Qualitative Hedonism,” *Philosophy* XLVI (April, 1972), pp. 140-51.

¹⁶ In fact, Mill’s discussion virtually *begs* for such an analysis, as his use of the language of desire and pleasure is freighted with ambiguities. Sometimes (as was most often the case with his father), he used the term ‘pleasure’ to refer to an aspect of a sensation, or to an internal sensation itself. At other times, he speaks of desiring *that* which is a pleasure, e.g., intellectual activity, money, virtue. In fact, the latter use tends to predominate in *Utilitarianism*, and it is that use which is most consistent with the present interpretation. He does appear to have been confused, however.

¹⁷ If one reads the essay in this way, it is evident that Mill did not give his *final* definition of happiness until *after* this discussion.

¹⁸ *CW*, pp. 210-11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 250-51. It is worth noting that the points made in this passage would help provide a rationale for an aspect of our moral life noted by Philippa Foot. If one distinguishes between positive duties (to *aid* someone), and negative duties (to avoid *harming* others), it would appear that, in general, the latter are

stricter, and carry greater weight. (Cf. Philippa Foot, "Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect," *The Oxford Review* V [1967].) This would be explained if security is central to happiness in the way Mill described, and observance of negative duties is the primary guarantee (open to human endeavor) of security.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 255. Mill's theory of rights and justice is rarely taken seriously. I believe, however, that the essay *On Liberty* can best be understood as an application of his theory of justice. In particular, I believe the essay on liberty is a defense of the claim that everyone who meets certain conditions has a right to individuality. In his autobiography, Mill described *On Liberty* in these very terms. This, however, is a subject for another study.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 237.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 239.

²⁷*A System of Logic*, pp. 621-22.

²⁸*Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government*, intro. by A. D. Lindsay (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1951), p. 97.

²⁹*O.L.*, p. 162. Gertrude Himmelfarb, in a recent book on *On Liberty*, maintains that Mill departed in the essay from any concern with the social feelings, and that the essay represents a rejection of "community, fraternity, and morality." (Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Liberty and Liberalism* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974], p. 91.) The passage quoted above can hardly be understood on this interpretation. Moreover, as Mill was concerned with asserting what *moral* rule should govern freedom in light of man's powerful desire to conform, and society's natural control of our lives, her claims represent radical misunderstandings of Mill's moral and political views.

³⁰Perhaps he thought he *had* shown the following: men do pursue only happiness, but *variously* conceived. A *kind* of happiness is intrinsically superior to others. Since all men are capable or pursuing *this* kind of happiness in some measure (it involves fulfilling one's capacities *as a man*), and since it is superior, it is the prime candidate for the test of morality.

³¹It may be that this was conceived by him as a matter for men of intelligence and experience to decide, i.e., to judge on the basis of their own experience and that of history what weightings of these elements are found satisfying to creatures with the nature and the capacities of men.