

Mill's Incubus*

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Describing the tail end of his famous ‘Mental Crisis,’ or perhaps its less-well-known sequels, John Stuart Mill tells us: “during the later returns of my dejection, the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity”—what we now call determinism—“weighed on my existence like an incubus” (I:175/A 5:18).¹ Even allowing for a Victorian literary vocabulary, this is an emotionally charged moment in Mill’s writing; an incubus, you will recall, is a supernatural sexual predator. And in a draft of a letter to Florence Nightingale, Mill crossed out, perhaps as too personal, a remark on “the chapter on Free Will & Necessity” in the *System of Logic*, of which he said: “I have always attached much value [to it] as being the writing down of a train of thought which had been very important to myself many years before, & even (if I may use the expression) critical in my own development” (XV:706n).

With signage like this, we should not underestimate the importance of freedom of the will in making sense of Mill’s life and thought. What Mill

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¹Freestanding cites of this form are to the standard edition of Mill’s works (1967–1989), by volume and page; *Utilitarianism*, *On Liberty*, *Considerations on Representative Government*, *The Subjection of Women*, and the *Autobiography* will be given slashed cites, with U, OL, RG, SW or A and chapter:paragraph following the uniform citation.

called his Mental Crisis was an emotional and intellectual turning point in his life, and much scholarship has been devoted to understanding his breakdown and subsequent recovery. Mill's *Autobiography* gives a good deal of airplay to his first breakdown, and little or none to his relapses; nonetheless, we should not assume that the issues the Crisis raised ceased to be immediate and pressing concerns in his later life.² Over and above its biographical interest, a philosopher as subtle and innovative as Mill might be expected to have important ideas about the problem of free will. Nevertheless, Mill's treatment of the topic is so badly neglected that I have found most philosophers to be unaware that he had one. Perhaps this is because parts of the treatment are unmarked, and distributed over much more of his written work than the chapter he could not quite bring himself to press on Nightingale; perhaps because a hasty reading of the chapter is likely to make his ideas seem more familiar and less interesting than they are. The signage notwithstanding, I do not think I have ever seen a discussion of Mill's Mental Crisis that plausibly puts his concerns about free will at the center of it.

In this essay I will attempt to trace out how Mill engaged the problem of freedom of the will as a way of diagnosing what had gone wrong with his own early life. I will use that story to make a suggestion about how and why Mill reconceived the notion of utility that he had inherited from Bentham. I will frame some of Mill's interests, especially in liberty and gender equality, as emerging out of his concerns about free will. (As I hope the progress of the argument will make clear, these apparently disparate themes are all part of one story.) And finally, I will take up the question of whether there could reasonably be—as he once claimed there was—an Art of Life.

1

Mill understood the traditional arguments about free will to have been driven by a confusion: the conflation of “Philosophical Necessity” with a

²Bain, 1882, p. 32, takes Mill's “later returns,” in the quote with which I began the paper, to mean further breakdowns, and he had the advantage over more recent readers of being well-acquainted with Mill personally. He tells us that Mill was “seized by an obstinate derangement of the brain” in 1836 (p. 42), and that “he had another relapse of his indisposition” in 1844. Bain seems to be of two minds as to how much continuity there was between Mill's breakdowns; on the one hand, he thinks that “we can plainly see in [his first] ‘mental crisis’ the beginning of the maladies that oppressed the second half of his life in a way that could not be mistaken” (p. 38); on the other, Mill “had many illnesses [after the second], but I do not know that anyone was so markedly an affection of the brain as on this occasion” (p. 44).

very different thesis, which, adapting one of his turns of phrase, I'm going to call *moral unfreedom*. Determinism has it that, "given the motives which are present to an individual's mind, and given likewise the character and disposition of the individual, the manner in which he will act might be unerringly inferred." This is almost certainly true, he held, "a statement in words of what every one is internally convinced of," but, and Mill devoted a great deal in the way of intellectual resources to making this case, not something we ought to find distressing.³ Moral unfreedom, on the other hand, *is* a great evil, but it is not metaphysically inevitable, or, for that matter, inevitable in practice.

Here I will put Mill's groundclearing treatment of determinism to one side, in favor of laying out his account of moral freedom and explaining its importance. Accordingly, when I mention 'freedom of the will' or 'free will,' I will mean moral freedom. It will be convenient to introduce the notion by presenting the following passages in reverse order:

A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist; that were he desirous of altogether throwing them off, there would not be required for that purpose a stronger desire than he knows himself to be capable of feeling. (VIII:841)

in common use [the term Necessity] stands for the operation of those causes exclusively, which are supposed too powerful to be counteracted at all. . . [But] human actions. . . are never (except in some cases of mania) ruled by any one motive with such absolute sway, that there is no room for the influence of any other. (VIII:839)

We feel, that if we wished to prove that we have the power of resisting [any particular] motive, we could do so.⁴ . . . it would be humiliating to our pride, and (what is of more importance)

³VIII:836f; compare IX:446f (Mill's discussion of Hamilton's treatment of freedom of the will): "What experience makes known, is the invariable sequence between every event and some special combination of antecedent conditions. . . A volition is a moral effect, which follows corresponding moral causes [i.e., psychological causes] as certainly and invariably as physical effects follow their physical causes." I reconstruct Mill's treatment of determinism in Millgram, 2009a.

⁴Mill adds, at this point, "that wish being, it needs scarcely be observed, a *new antecedent*"—the point being that there is no violation of the natural order of which determinism is the consequence.

paralysing to our desire of excellence, if we thought otherwise.
(VIII:838)

Moral unfreedom consists in monomania. Putting the characterization a bit more formally than Mill himself did, the will is free—that is, morally free—when, for any motivation you have, there are psychologically available to you further motivations which you could marshal to trump it. Because the phrase is slightly misleading to twenty-first century ears, it is worth adding that the notion is not restricted to what we would think of as moral matters. Moral freedom is a state of character: a near-equilibrium, in which one’s motivations are in relative balance with each other.

In the *Autobiography*, Mill ascribes his recovery from his Mental Crisis to, among other things, thinking his way through the problem of determinism. Doing that consisted in the first place in disentangling it from moral unfreedom.⁵ But distinguishing something which only seemed to be fraught from something which really was fraught turned out, I am going to suggest, not to be the finish line. When we get to the bottom of the problem posed by Philosophical Necessity, we will find that moral unfreedom, and not the traditional worry about determinism, was Mill’s incubus.

But why? We saw Mill being quick to imply that monomania is unusual. For most people, getting clear about determinism (and, in particular, seeing that it’s not the same thing as fatalism—as helplessly ending up doing what you’re condemned to do, whether you want to or not) is the end of the story, because they do not have to worry about what is, after all, a psychiatric disorder. If Mill was nonetheless preoccupied by moral unfreedom, we need to entertain the possibility that, rarity notwithstanding, he thought himself to be—or have been—morally unfree. And so to explain how Mill could have seen himself as possessing a character trait tantamount to monomania, we will take a detour through his psychology. However, our entry point will be, not his overtly psychological writings, but a passage in his ethics.

⁵In his *Hamilton*, there is an intermediate stage in peeling apart the two senses of ‘freedom’. “We shall find,” Mill writes, “there is a solution, which relieves the human mind from . . . embarrassment: namely, that the question to which experience says yes [i.e., is the will determined? cf. note 3], and that to which consciousness says no [again, is the will determined?], are different questions.” The sense of necessity being distinguished from the thesis of causal determinism is the one that justifies punishment for wrongdoing: “What is meant by moral responsibility? Responsibility means punishment.” Now, there are extenuating circumstances that make punishment unjust, and one of the “just ground[s] of exemption” is being “under the action of such a violent motive that no fear of punishment could have any effect” (IX:448, 454, 464). That is, when a motive is such that no competing motive could trump it, one counts as morally unfree.

2

It is well-known that Mill introduced a new device into the utilitarian conceptual toolkit, namely, the distinction between higher and lower pleasures: if a preponderance of those who have experienced both of two pleasures prefer any of one to any amount, however great, of the other, then the former is a higher pleasure.⁶ ‘Pleasures’ is the Millian way of talking about goods generally, and so Mill is telling us that some goods, and some reasons, are lexicographically (I’ll just say ‘lexically’) ranked over others.⁷ Bear in mind that this is a *formal* characterization: as far as the definition goes, anyway, a ‘higher’ pleasure isn’t necessarily a ‘classier’ pleasure. Substantive characterizations of the higher pleasures have to be argued for separately.

Mill introduced the higher pleasures together with the so-called decided preference criterion, i.e., that appeal to the preferences of the experienced; very typically, he was trying to get more than one philosophical job done at the same time. To keep the exposition tractable, let’s pause to distinguish two of them.

Like many informed-desire (or informed-preference) theorists today, Mill wanted a way to correct the inputs to deliberation. And, again like many informed-desire theorists today, he was an instrumentalist; that is, he believed that reasoning about what to do was comprised solely of means-end reasoning, and consequently could not correct the desires that served as those inputs. Contemporary informed-desire theorists square these constraints by taking as their standard for the correctness of your desires and preferences what you *would* want if, say, you knew more. Mill instead appealed to the preferences of others who *do* know more. Nonetheless, both devices have a common function, namely, to correct those desires (or preferences), noninferentially. Call this the *corrective* function of the higher

⁶The distinction is presented and put to work in *Utilitarianism* (X:211/U 2:5), which was published a good deal later than the *System of Logic*; consequently, we must bear in mind, in tying the pieces of our story together, that when Mill wrote the chapter of the *System* that explicitly addressed the problem of freedom of the will, he did not yet have the terminology I am laying out—which does not imply that he did not have the conceptual apparatus, or anyway a precursor of it.

⁷For an explanation of lexicographic orderings, see Weisstein, 1999. Notice that, in this passage in *Utilitarianism*, Mill is introducing a bit of technical terminology with a job to do: a “higher” pleasure isn’t merely a “more valuable” pleasure, but one whose greater value can’t be rendered quantitatively (Mill puts to one side “its being greater in amount”). The device is needed to solve problems in political and moral philosophy posed by unwanted tradeoffs. That is, U 2:5 is not introducing two or three distinct notions in successive sentences of the paragraph, but one device, whose workings are given a full paragraph’s worth of explanation.

pleasures. Obviously, that a preference is correct, as witnessed by the preferences of other, more experienced people, does not entail that you exhibit the preference.⁸

Because the corrective function of the decided preference criterion makes use of the actual preferences of actual people, the distinction between the higher and lower pleasures also characterizes the operation of certain pleasures or desires or preferences in particular psychological economies. This *descriptive* use of the notion of higher pleasures prescind from whether they are or are not correct preferences. My concern at this point is the descriptive rather than the corrective notion. That is, I am going to be discussing what operates as a higher pleasure for someone: what he would not, as a matter of psychological fact, trade off for all the—and here you can fill in the blank with a suitable contrasting good—in the world. With only clearly marked exceptions, when I mention higher and lower pleasures, I will mean the objects of such uncorrected lexical preferences.⁹

Being a higher pleasure is, on Mill's definition, a relational property: a pleasure is higher with respect to a specific contrasting pleasure. This means that, as far as the definition goes, a pleasure could be higher with respect to another pleasure, while being lower with respect to a third. In *Utilitarianism*, however, Mill writes as though pleasures fall into two *classes*, the higher and the lower, and that raises two questions for us. One is historical: why did Mill come to talk of the pleasures as higher and lower, plain and simple? Here and now I want to address a second and nonexegetical question, namely, what to make of the further possibilities to which the relation of being a higher pleasure points.

There are many structures that an unconstrained two-place relation might induce, but I am going to concentrate on just two of them. First of all, some pleasures might turn out, as a matter of psychological fact about some particular individual, to be higher than (that is, lexically preferred to) pleasures that are already themselves higher with respect to other pleasures. Second, some psychologies of this sort might exhibit a *highest pleasure*, by which I mean, a pleasure that counts as higher with respect to any other possible object of choice, including other higher pleasures. I should emphasize that this terminology is my own extension of Mill's; he does not talk of "highest pleasures" himself.

⁸For critical discussion, see Millgram, 2005, pp. 68f, 82ff nn 27, 28, 31; Enoch, 2005.

⁹For Mill's account of the psychological implementation of higher and lower pleasures, see Millgram, 2009b. Mill's example of a personality exhibiting a merely descriptively higher pleasure is the miser, whose preference for money over all else is not endorsed by most of us.

3

The young John Stuart Mill had been raised to be a political activist, “[a] reformer of the world” (I:137/A 5:2), in the service of a radical movement whose declared objective was the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number. He had been brought up to give the general utility lexical priority in his decisionmaking. His life seemed to constitute a single large project, in which every, or almost every, activity or enterprise served to advance the utilitarian political agenda.

Ignore for a moment a possibility that will shortly become important for the argument: that you do something, not because you want to, but out of sheer habit. If we are ignoring it, then, in Mill’s psychology, what motivates you must be a desire.¹⁰ Recall that a personality controlled by a highest pleasure is just one that won’t sacrifice any of its highest pleasure for any amount of anything else. So to have an objective that trumps any other reason that might present itself *is* to have a ‘highest pleasure’. (Once again, it’s a *formal* notion: something can count as a ‘pleasure’, or a ‘higher pleasure’, or, in our extension of Mill’s vocabulary, a ‘highest pleasure’, even if it doesn’t *sound* like a lot of fun.) The young Mill’s mind was a psychology built around a single priority, namely, the organizing end of the utilitarian political platform. So if we want to see what happens to a personality that is organized around a highest pleasure, we ought to take a close look at Mill himself.

We are told that “the train of thought which extricated [Mill] from [the problem of freedom of the will¹¹] forms the chapter on Liberty and Necessity in the concluding Book of . . . [the] *System of Logic*” (I:177/A 5:18). In the final section of that chapter, Mill supplements the associationist psychological theory that he had inherited from his father with an additional piece of apparatus.

In that earlier account, action was explained by desire; to desire was to associate pleasure with the object of desire.¹² But, Mill pointed out,

a motive does not mean always, or solely, the anticipation of a

¹⁰The explanation of action was crude but clear. An object of desire would be associated with its causes, those causes in turn with their causes, and so on back to the idea of a muscular movement. Pleasure associated with the object of desire, cascading down the chain of associated ideas, enlivens the idea at the terminus of the chain, and the muscle contracts, resulting in an action.

¹¹In particular, from “the dilemma of thinking one doctrine true, and the contrary doctrine morally beneficial”.

¹²Mill, 1869, vol. 2, pp. 191f.

pleasure or a pain. . .

As we proceed in the formation of habits, and become accustomed to will a particular act or 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 [notice that Mill is defining a technical term]; and among the causes of our volitions. . . 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 [and here comes another definition of a technical term] a confirmed character.¹³

Here Mill is augmenting the older psychological machinery. There are now two ways of explaining action; desire (on the older associationist understanding of it), and habit, the fossilized remains of action on the basis of desire (understood that older way, as equivalent to anticipated pleasure). Just to have a way of keeping the terminology straight, I'm going to continue using the term 'desire' with the older meaning, even though in this passage Mill allows himself to use it in a more generic sense.¹⁴

We are now ready to connect our brief exploration of the higher pleasures with Mill's discussion of freedom of the will. Moral unfreedom consists in having a motivation that you couldn't resist, even if you wanted to. It's natural to imagine this as a redescription of a lopsided pattern of desires.

¹³VIII:842f; compare X:238/U 4:11: "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. . . Many indifferent things, which men originally did from a motive of some sort, they continue to do from habit." Or again, "when what was at first a direct impulse towards pleasure, or recoil from pain, has passed into a habit or a fixed purpose, then the strength of the motive means the completeness and promptitude of the association which has been formed between an idea and an outward act." (IX:468)

¹⁴Mill himself later sorted out the terminology along these lines: "The distinction between will and desire. . . is an authentic and highly important psychological fact; but the fact consists solely in this—that will, like all other parts of our constitution, is amenable to habit, and that we may will from habit what we no longer desire for itself, or desire only because we will it. It is not the less true that will, in the beginning, is entirely produced by desire; including in the term the repelling influence of pain as well as the attractive one of pleasure." (X:238/U 4:11)

But such a motivation could also be produced if a pattern of choice became frozen into “a habit of willing.” And we can expect that to happen when the relevant type of choice is made repeatedly and always in one way.

A character for whom there are *several* pleasures (an important special case: for whom there are several *higher* pleasures) that are not lexically ranked with respect to one another will, when faced with competing pleasures, presumably choose sometimes one, sometimes the other. But a personality structured around a highest pleasure gives lexical priority to a single object of choice; that is to say, it always makes one type of choice (between its highest pleasure and anything else) in the same way. A personality structured around a highest pleasure should thus be expected to end up morally unfree.

We saw that, as an adolescent, John Stuart Mill’s personality was structured around a single, overriding objective; in his psychology, that objective functioned as a highest pleasure. Thus, for Mill, the threat of moral unfreedom was all too live. His modified associationist psychology predicted that someone living a life such as his own would eventually come to be “ruled by . . . one motive with such absolute sway, that there [would be] no room for any other”—a state of mind that we saw Mill describe as “mania”. The process must not have taken over-long: the onset of his Mental Crisis dates to 1826, when he was around 20.

4

In our philosophical tradition, a ‘free will’ sounds like a good thing, and an ‘unfree will,’ like a bad one. But we have just seen Mill give ‘freedom of the will’ a novel sense. So why should his ‘moral unfreedom’ amount to a theoretical or even a personal disaster?

In fact, that rhetorical question often enough gets the answer that it is no disaster at all: on the contrary. Mill’s concern, differently labeled, has come in for a good deal of recent philosophical attention. Daniel Dennett evidently admires Martin Luther’s pronouncement, “I can no other,” as the natural expression of a system of motivations in which one motivation always has priority. Harry Frankfurt’s extended discussion of “practical necessity” is equally admiring, as is John McDowell’s discussion of “silencing”, as is Bernard Williams’s treatment of much the same phenomenon under the label of “moral incapacity”. What Mill thinks of as moral unfreedom has, under other names, been widely taken for the *sine qua non* of a decent human

life.¹⁵

And, after all, why not? It consists in having a confirmed character of a certain sort. Having a confirmed character is being psychologically capable of going ahead with courses of action you know you're not going to enjoy; that in itself is no more than being a grownup. The particular sort of confirmed character that Mill had become was someone who made an overriding objective of the general utility. If fighting for the Greatest Good of the Greatest Number is laudable, why the distress at the disposition to do so becoming psychologically entrenched? Even if it became *so* psychologically entrenched that Mill was no longer able to deviate from it, wouldn't that just amount to having an unswervingly virtuous character? Barry Goldwater once insisted that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; why isn't singleminded determination in the pursuit of the greatest happiness, great virtue?

Consider for moment a further consequence of Mill's hedonic psychology. Changes in your desires or pleasures are predicted by the Laws of Association, as, roughly, the effects of the impact of experience on the system of associations that constitute your character. To take a very crude example, if, in your current affective configuration, you enjoy seeing and wearing straw hats, and if straw hats are for a while regularly accompanied by bright blue feathers, you will come to enjoy, and so to desire, bright blue feathers. Now, most of your experience is, as far as anyone can tell, mere happenstance. (Who *knew* that blue feathers in straw hats would become a trend?) So what you find to be pleasant and painful, and so, what you desire or dislike, will, normally, change over time. Call the sum of your likes and dislikes your *hedonic profile*. Then we can say that, according to the psychology that served Mill throughout his intellectual life, your hedonic profile evolves under the impact of experience—much of which is, for all intents and purposes, random. If we select a person's hedonic profile at a time as his base state, then, normally, we will expect his profile to drift away from that base state; the more time elapses, the further the profile will depart from it.

Drift is not the only way that hedonic profiles alter. Mill's account of

¹⁵Dennett, 1984, p. 133; Frankfurt, 1988, chs. 7, 13, Frankfurt, 1999, chs. 9, 14; McDowell, 1998, ch. 3, Williams, 1995. The liveliness with which these notions are invoked suggests that if Mill does turn out to have something to tell us about moral unfreedom, we should not assume his conclusions to be of merely antiquarian interest.

To be sure, these accounts differ a great deal both from one another (e.g., Watson, 2002, sec. 6, compares and contrasts Williams's and Frankfurt's versions of practical necessity) and from Mill's. In particular, they do not typically share Mill's end-like (or purposive) conception of the form and content of what it is one cannot but do. Still, I think the problem I am about to exhibit in Mill can, suitably modified, be raised for each of them.

his own *Mental Crisis*, for instance, emphasizes the effects of introspection. A dramatic shift in Mill's hedonic profile was produced, he informs us, by what is perhaps an unusual cause, his carefully trained ability to see through the associations that were responsible for his desires and pleasures. The undermining trains of thought had roughly this sort of content: "I only like straw hats because it's an effect of my conditioning. That's not a very good reason. I guess I really don't like straw hats, after all." In Mill's case, too much hard-eyed self-examination left him a motivational wasteland.¹⁶

Finally for now, you might think that being very clear about the reasons for your preferences would serve to anchor them. For instance, and to take Mill's own case, if he understood himself to have absolutely decisive reasons for his utilitarian commitments, then shouldn't his utilitarianism stand fast against the deconditioning effects that we have just described?¹⁷

However, in his contributions to a second edition of his father's psychology textbook, Mill laid out the processes that undercut even the most thoroughly supported commitments. Either you attend to your reasons, or you do not. If you do not, the Laws of Association tell us that your unreinforced associations will gradually fade away; as they do, the pleasures and desires which depend on those associations will fade as well. But if you do attend to your reasons—imagine that you return to them repeatedly, rehearsing them to yourself over and over again—the Laws of Association predict that, one by one, the ideas that make up your train of thought will be spliced out of your mind. Monotonous repetition, it turns out, makes ideas vanish, like so many Cheshire cats.¹⁸ And, as before, when the ideas vanish,

¹⁶Vogler, 2001, is a recommended treatment of this aspect of his *Mental Crisis*.

¹⁷Although Mill's instrumentalism might seem to entail that he was not in a position to give reasons for his utilitarianism, he did, late in life, advance a proof of the Principle of Utility. For one version of its workings, see Millgram, 2005, ch. 3, but also pp. 13–16, for caveats.

¹⁸Here is the explanation: frequent repetition of a series of associated mental states, call them *A*, *B* and *C*, will, if there is "nothing to make the mind dwell on" *B*, produce an associative connection directly between *A* and *C*: "*B* will cease to be excited at all; and the train of association, like a stream which breaking through its bank cuts off a bend in its course, will thenceforth flow in the direct line *AC*, omitting *B*" (Mill, 1869, vol. 1, pp. 106–110, 231–232). For a fuller treatment, see Millgram, 2004, sec. 2.

Mill's examples are drawn from skills like reading (after a while, you no longer notice the letters). But they can be supplemented with instances of large political import which suggest that, whether or not Mill's psychological tools were explanatorily adequate to the phenomenon, he was onto something. Laura Wharton has investigated how, between 1965 and 1985, Israel's largest socialist party abandoned its socioeconomic platform. Her archival work suggests that the best explanation for the dramatic shift in policy is what she terms "Millian neglect": that both party elites and voters became insensitive to their

the pleasures, desires and commitments that depend on those ideas vanish as well.

Either way, a fixed inventory of even the best reasons in the world will fail to maintain the stability of a hedonic profile. The shape of Mill's dilemma is reproduced in a hysterical worry on which he became fixated during the Mental Crisis, that as the finitely-many possible arrangements of notes were exhausted, "the pleasure of music" would be eroded, because it "fades with familiarity, and requires either to be revived by intermittence, or fed by continual novelty" (I:149/A 5:8). And while a constant supply of novel reasons can prevent the gradual fading away of one's ideas and desires (and this turned out to be one of Mill's more surprising arguments for freedom of speech and of the press), who is to say that novel reasons will support the old desires that made up one's former hedonic profile?

What matters for present purposes is that hedonic profiles are liable to change; Mill's introspective self-analysis was merely one of several possible causes. His psychology predicts that even without it, his hedonic profile would have changed anyway.

Let's ask, then, what is bound to happen to a confirmed character, one whose choices are structured around a highest lexical priority. On the one hand, the effect of having a highest pleasure, Mill discovered, is to lock one's ends and activities into place: "the will, once so fashioned, may be steady and constant, when the passive susceptibilities of pleasure and pain are greatly weakened, or materially changed" (VIII:843). On the other, associative connections are constantly being reshaped by experience—and other things. We expect an individual's hedonic profile to alter over time.

As hedonic profiles evolve, for whatever reason, they are likely to drift away from any locked-in priority. If a confirmed character stays stable, and a person's hedonic profile shifts, eventually that person's purposes and what he enjoys will no longer match. "Will," he tells us, "is the child of desire, and passes out of the dominion of its parent only to come under that of habit. That which is the result of habit affords no presumption of being intrinsically good." (X:239/U 4:11) And so, to have a highest pleasure means, paradoxically, eventually having not much pleasure at all.

Mill's Mental Crisis is routinely described as a depressive episode, and certainly the fifth chapter of his *Autobiography* contains lengthy passages that sound like reports of clinical depression. He realized that he did not

reasons for the platform, in virtue of just the sort of unvarying repetition that Mill highlights. The socialists were never argued out of their position; rather, by dint of hearing their doctrines, and the reasons for them, tiresomely repeated, they were *bored* out of it.

care about the supreme goal that had structured his life. When, we are told

it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, ‘Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?’ . . . an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, ‘No!’ (I:139/A 5:2)

But the problem was not simply that he was depressed. If Mill’s affliction *had* only been clinical depression, it would not have been nearly as bad as it was, and it would not have shaped Mill’s life and philosophizing as it did.

The deeper problem was that, although he was depressed and unmotivated, he could not *act* depressed. His hedonic profile had undergone a dramatic shift, and was now sharply out of step with his activities, which went on, it must have seemed, almost of their own accord. People who are depressed mope around, can’t get out of bed in the morning, and give up on the enterprises for which they have no heart; if Mill had been able to do any of this, he would not have been as desperate as he was. Instead, having realized that he simply did not care about his party’s platform, he could not cease working to advance it. The pace of his labors did not slow perceptibly, and hardly any of his acquaintances seem even to have realized that anything was wrong.¹⁹

The young Mill’s personality was built around a highest pleasure—a single lexical priority. Having locked his ends and activities into place, and having then undergone a shift in hedonic profile, caring about nothing he did, he found himself the helpless passenger of his own life, which lurched onwards beneath him like an out-of-control robot.

Because associationists analyzed desires as ideas of the objects of desire associated with the idea of pleasure, Mill’s hedonistic psychological theory did not allow him to distinguish between what he found pleasant and what he wanted: “[d]esiring a thing and finding it pleasant,” he insisted late in life, “are . . . in strictness of language, two different modes of naming the same psychological fact” (X:237/U 4:10). But his moral psychology also did not distinguish between what he wanted and what he cared about, what was important to him, what mattered to him, and what concerned him. That means that Mill was unable to express the full gravity of his predicament.²⁰ Allow that profiles of *concern* shift as well; for all kinds of reasons, what

¹⁹Packe, 1954, p. 80.

²⁰I’m grateful to Ken Gemes for pressing me to clarify this point.

matters to you changes over time. If the pattern of activities and choices you make is locked in, and is unable to move in tandem with your altered sense of what is important to you, eventually you will find yourself, like Mill, pursuing goals about which you no longer care, and which do not matter to you.

Mill describes his moving encounter with Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" as helping him emerge from his distraught emotional state. If I am correct in my reading of what was at the bottom of it, we can say why that particular poem resonated so deeply in Mill's psyche. Mill tells us that "along with the two passages of grand imagery but bad philosophy so often quoted, I found that he too had had similar experience to mine" (I:149–153/A 5:9–10). And indeed, what we find Wordsworth describing is a course of life (which he makes out to be the normal progress of human existence) in which one becomes motivationally hollowed out, and one's activities, shaped by "imitation" and "custom" to "the inevitable yoke," proceed independently of one's motivational engagement with them. The affective immediacy of childhood is dimly remembered, from the perspective of the adult's alienated personality constructs, as the "time when meadow, grove and stream,/ The earth, and every common sight,/ . . . did seem/ Apparelled in celestial light,/ The glory and the freshness of a dream. . . / The things which I have seen I now can see no more."²¹ Mill must have felt Wordsworth to be allegorizing the catastrophic mismatch of volitional and hedonic profiles.

5

There is more than one way to tell the story of how Mill came to experience that mismatch, and I want to quickly review an alternative version of the narrative—one that is, I think, both independently plausible, and compatible with the account I have just given.²²

John Stuart Mill had been brought up under his father's extremely close supervision. James Mill was, as I have already indicated, an associationist

²¹Wordsworth, 1958, vol. iv, pp. 279–285. Paul, 1998, is a reading of Mill's *Mental Crisis* that emphasizes the cultivation of sympathy, and thus echoes one element of the Ode's resolution. However, Mill was far too secular to have endorsed the religious elements of Wordsworth's train of thought, and failing to do so gives "primal sympathy," "the soothing thoughts that spring/ Out of human suffering," and "the philosophic mind" the look of a second-rate consolation prize. For this reason, I think we have to look beyond the turn to sympathy in making sense of Mill's response.

²²I'm grateful to Candace Vogler for pressing this line in conversation.

psychologist, and his approach to his eldest son's education was almost certainly shaped by his theoretical views. The close control of reward and punishment, for the most part praise and blame, would have been used to shape the child's character. The practically inevitable effect of such an upbringing would have been to make *pleasing his father* into the very young John Stuart Mill's highest pleasure.

As the son grew into youth, and then into adulthood, he developed new interests: a stake in the utilitarian political project, and personal ambitions that were closely interwoven with it. Mill found himself hoping for a public and political career, one that might realistically lead to a seat in Parliament; to make that possible, he would have to attend university. Leaving home to pursue his studies would have had the additional benefit of releasing him from his father's monitoring—that is, from a situation which, by the time he had become an adolescent, must have been well-nigh unbearable. We can classify these developments as hedonic drift.

James Mill vetoed his son's higher education, on the grounds that Oxford and Cambridge were religious institutions. Instead, he found John Stuart Mill a job at the British East India Company. . . where the son's direct supervisor would continue be his own father. I expect that, had he been sufficiently determined, the younger Mill could have declined the position. But too much practice at conforming to his father's wishes had made the disposition to do so an aspect of a confirmed character. His habits of compliance overrode his changed hedonic profile, and he took up the career in colonial administration which he would follow for most of his adult life.²³ Moral unfreedom was a fraught subject for Mill not least because it was inextricably bound up with regret.

6

In Bentham, utility is a qualitatively homogenous sensation, something whose quantity it makes sense to try to maximize. Thus, for a Benthamite utilitarian, decision making is, in principle, an arithmetic exercise, and so to make utility (whether one's own utility or everybody's) one's overriding

²³The account I am presenting here draws on Carlisle, 1991, which is also recommended reading for those with an interest in the subject. Kinzer, 2007, pp. 36f, 63f, 131, lists the scarce occasions on which Mill defied his father. One of these pertained to a personal matter, and even in this case, as Kinzer nicely puts it, "The first reported instance of such frank opposition would also be the last." Others were ideological, and James Mill's "eldest son could not muster the courage for a candid reckoning of the differences that had grown up between them."

end, to come to have it as one's highest pleasure, is to commit oneself to determinate answers to choice problems. It is thus also to undergo the training effects of encountering the same choice problem repeatedly: when it's being made correctly, the same choice will always get made in the same way.

By the time we get to the argument for the Principle of Utility, in ch. 4 of Mill's *Utilitarianism*, what 'utility' means has quietly changed—quietly, because Mill was deeply loyal to his mentors and party leaders, and that's how he tended to handle his disagreements with them. Mill argues there that utility is the only thing that is desirable, on the grounds that any apparent counterexamples (say, money, or virtue) that are not merely desirable as a means to something else, but desired on their own account, are thereby parts of utility (X:235f/U 4:5–6). That argument makes sense only if utility is understood to be something on the order of a basket of all the intrinsically desired or desirable goods.

Benthamite utility functioned as a full-fledged and very rigid end, determining courses of action that could properly proceed in only one way—or in a very narrow range of ways.²⁴ Millian utility functions as a very different kind of end (or, perhaps, 'end'). Because utility is just a collection of items in a basket, the guidance that end gives is guaranteed to be univocal only when the priority relations and the ways of making tradeoffs among the components of utility are fixed.²⁵ But how often will that happen?

²⁴Rosen, 2003, ch. 10, emphasizes that Bentham allowed pleasure (and presumably pain) to come in higher and lower octanes (e.g., some pleasure is more pure, has less of an admixture of unpleasant feeling, etc.); the suggestion is that Bentham's and Mill's conceptions of utility are not all that far apart, after all. There is a delicate point about interpretative methodology that needs to be introduced here. Mill was a very unusual character in nineteenth-century England, someone who had the ability to construct arguments meeting and even exceeding the standards of tightness and filigree accepted by twentieth- and twenty-first century analytic philosophers—i.e., philosophers whose graduate education includes drill in the mechanics of argumentation. (For a sense of what counted as respectable at the time, take a look at Whewell, 1847.) Bentham, like most of his contemporaries, was by our lights not very good at argument. So when you want to figure out what Mill means by a technical term, you ask—as we just did—what sense it has to have for the arguments in which he makes it figure to come out tightly constructed. When you want to figure out what Bentham means, you pay attention merely to the textual surface, i.e., to the words. Here's what applying those dicta gets us. Bentham's utility is like gas; when you're buying gas, you take into account, along with the price per gallon, the octane, the likelihood that the gas is stale, etc.—but you're still buying one thing, gas, the single commodity that serves as fuel for your car. Whereas Mill's utility, as we're in the course of seeing, is not, functionally, a single commodity at all.

²⁵Oddly enough, something like that is true even when one's own utility is at issue. Although Mill's psychology more or less guarantees that, faced with two options, either one or another of them will seem more pleasant to you, or they will seem equally pleasant,

Recall the decided preference criterion, the idea that you appeal to the preferences of the majority of the more experienced for guidance in figuring out what those priority relations are. For prescriptive or corrective use of the higher pleasures, most or almost all experienced judges have to be conditioned to have the *same* preferences. And recall that much of the impact of experience on the pattern of associations that constitutes a mind is for all practical purposes random. That means that shared priorities, such as the (prescriptive) higher pleasures, require a very demanding sort of explanation, one that simply won't be available most of the time. Indeed, we know something about these explanations go, because Mill took great pains to show that liberty and justice are higher pleasures, and the elaborateness of those arguments confirms our conclusion.²⁶

Generalizing, while there may be a handful of very firm constraints (again: liberty and justice trump a great many other concerns), the priority relations of the components of Millian utility for the most part won't be fixed. That means that Millian utility will often give *equivocal* guidance, and that means in turn that you can pursue everybody's utility in a great many different ways without going wrong.

For example, it may be that neither of two higher pleasures, such as liberty and security, is lexically ranked over the other, yet we may have to manage tradeoffs between them. Germany and the United States manage this particular tradeoff slightly differently; in the US, one is free to publish *Mein Kampf*, but in Germany, one is not. The decided preference criterion suggests appealing to the preferences of the experienced. If it turns out that all, or almost all, of those who have lived in both countries have strong views on the subject, and pretty much all the same views, then I suppose that, on Mill's way of thinking, that would tell us something about how we ought to draw that line. If it turns out that opinions are varied, or not particularly emphatic, then both mixes of these higher pleasures should be

the corrective function of the decided preference criterion is to make room for the idea that you might be mistaken about what you really want. Your confidence that the objects of your desires will not prove disappointing is to be underwritten by the preferences of other and more experienced judges. When unanimity on the part of the external referees is lacking, or your own hedonic expectations are controverted by their consensus, you may quite reasonably wonder whether what you feel yourself to prefer is really part of your own utility.

²⁶For reconstructions, see Millgram, 2009b. Moreover, recall Mill's interest in original personalities: unless Mill is willing to treat their preferences as noise, we should expect the convergence required by the decided preference criterion to be undercut by them; but a willingness to allow them to wash out seems hard to square with the importance, for Mill, of original personalities as scouts and guides for the rest of us.

regarded as allowable options. Suppose that what you're after is the general utility; then you can legitimately join advocacy groups on either side of that sort of free-speech issue. Suppose that what you're after is your own utility; you should regard yourself as free to live in either country, depending on your own uncorrected preferences.

What it means to pursue Millian utility is thus very different from what it means to pursue Benthamite utility. First, because the same end, that is, the same basket of goods, can be pursued in many different ways, there is a great deal of choice left up to you in deciding how to pursue it. Bentham had thought that the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number was best expedited by a campaign for legal reform. Although Mill was quite qualified to follow in Bentham's footsteps (he had read law with John Austin, and edited—pretty much rewritten, that is—a five-volume work on jurisprudence by Bentham²⁷), he left that project largely to others, and chose utility-promoting enterprises which better suited his own concerns and temperament. You can stick to *this* sort of end, while nonetheless adjusting what you do to match a changing concern profile.

Second, because choices that serve this 'end' needn't always be substantively the same choice (you serve utility now by choosing liberty over justice, later by choosing justice over liberty), the exclusive pursuit of utility needn't produce the conditioning effects we suggested Mill had become so very anxious to avoid. Together, these results tell us that there is a way to escape our earlier argument, the one that took us from having a highest pleasure to having a morally unfree character. If one's highest pleasure is an 'end' that formally resembles Millian utility in being a basket of ends, the priority relations among which are only sparsely defined, then one can endorse it as one's overriding objective because it is only verbally and not substantively one's end.²⁸

²⁷Bentham, 1827.

²⁸Millian utility is too easily regarded as a halfway house between the older conception, on which it is a sensation, and today's von Neumann-Morgenstern utility functions, on which utility is a construction out of revealed preferences. On this way of seeing him, Mill shares with us the idea that utility is constructed out of preferences, lacks the mathematical sophistication to deploy preferences over probability mixtures, and disreputably preserves the sensation of pleasure in his psychological theory of how those preferences are implemented. That turns out to be quite misleading, and there is a short way to say how. VNM utility functions require preference relations that are complete: for any two elements a and b of the agent's choice set, either the agent prefers a to b , or he prefers b to a , or he is indifferent between a and b . Millian utility does the job that Mill needed precisely because experienced judges do not agree on their preferences over many of the elements, and thus, because the (prescriptively relevant) preference relations are drastically *incomplete*.

Mill availed himself of this option in a very interesting way. He describes a number of lessons he believed himself to have learned from his *Mental Crisis*: most importantly, that “the internal culture of the individual” was “among the prime necessities of human well-being,” and that, under this heading, “the maintenance of a due balance among the faculties. . . [was] of primary importance” (I:147/A 5:7). A “due balance among the faculties” is what it takes to be morally free; it means in the first place that no motivation inevitably trumps all one’s other motivations, whether one by one, or in concert.²⁹ Another way to put it is that characters ought to be shaped so that they can have *higher* pleasures, but no substantive *highest* pleasure: a satisfactory personality has a number of substantive and independent priorities, no one of which trumps *all* the rest.

And so, instead of Benthamite legal reform, Mill turned to thinking through institutions that appear to us in retrospect as the framework of a liberal society. But Mill wasn’t what today’s political philosophers think of as a liberal (that is, someone who is scrupulously neutral when it comes to what their fellow citizens are like and are after), because the point of those institutions was to shape people’s characters. The characters Mill’s proposed reforms were meant to produce, I want to suggest, were (among other things) personalities capable of reallocating their energies among different higher pleasures, as their hedonic profiles shift: characters whose wills are morally free.³⁰

Let’s use *On the Subjection of Women* to illustrate the point, rather than *On Liberty*, which is perhaps the more obvious example; this will allow us to correct an impression made by one of Mill’s asides. Recall that in the course of introducing the notion of moral freedom, Mill contrasted it with “mania,” and did so in a turn of phrase that conveyed the thought that moral unfreedom was rare. However, now that we know how moral unfreedom is produced, we see that that cannot have been Mill’s considered view. His portrait of the education and circumstances of the women of his day should lead us to expect that femininity, more or less, will become the first highest pleasure of a person who is subjected to them: “it would be a miracle if the

²⁹That turn of phrase is usually read as being about balancing reason with feeling, and that is Mill’s message here. But if I’m right about what Mill took the problem to be, we should see generally flat affect as a special case. When there is not much in the way of motivation to marshal, it is easy for lone motives to be irresistible.

³⁰Millgram, 2009b, suggests that Mill also hoped they would produce original and surprising characters, and that his arguments on that score ran afoul of the fact that you cannot predict or manufacture surprises. Balanced personalities are systematically achievable in a way that “Genius” is not, and Mill may have turned to theorizing about producing them in the hopes of serving a more realistic political aspiration.

object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character” (XXI:272/SW 1:11). We should then anticipate that changing hedonic profiles will leave those women trapped in volitional postures that are the shells of their early hedonic profiles. If that is right, the arguments of *Subjection of Women* are meant to promote a legal and social framework in which women’s wills can be free.³¹

In adjusting his conception of the utilitarian program to accommodate the lessons of his Mental Crisis, Mill was doing the very thing we have just described: readjusting the mix of activities, within his pursuit of his overall utilitarian project, to match his hedonic—and concern—profile. Like victims of abuse who devote their later lives to running shelters, or like self-made men who spend their fortunes on scholarships for the poor, Mill cared very much about making sure that no one would ever have to go through what he had. The design and implementation of social reforms intended to cultivate balanced characters was thus an enterprise he found emotionally compelling, and by choosing to pursue it, he was reshaping his life around his own very personal concerns, and thereby making it a life he inhabited, rather than one he merely occupied.

7

In what was evidently meant as the segue from the *System of Logic* to his *Utilitarianism*, Mill introduces the idea of ‘Art’. An art is an organized body of practical and theoretical knowledge; its scope is specified by an end, and the principle of organization is instrumentalist, or means-end. “Every art has one first principle, or general major premise, not borrowed from science; that which enunciates the object aimed at, and affirms it to be a desirable object” (VIII:949). “The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to the science. The science receives it, considers it as a phenomenon or effect to be studied, and having investigated its causes and conditions, sends it back to art with a theorem of the combinations of circumstances by which it could be produced” (VIII:944).

Mill then wraps up his discussion by suggesting that there is an Art of Life, and that utility (“the happiness of mankind, or rather, of all sentient beings”) is its defining goal or “general principle.” An art is, if you think

³¹For this suggestion, I’m indebted to Rae Langton. I owe the more general idea that freedom of the will is part of the agenda of *Subjection* to Luana Mueller; her unpublished manuscript focuses on the benefits of gender equality that, Mill insisted, would accrue specifically to men (the voters whom he needed to convince). The predicted effects on character, Mueller argues, are tantamount to a Millian free will.

about it, Mill's updated rendering of *techne*, and, for my own part, I am quite skeptical about the thought that, even if life is aimed at happiness, it is thereby the sort of enterprise that can be reduced to a *technique*. Life is *everything* that one does (or, we are sometimes told, what happens while one is making other plans), and because there are indefinitely many and arbitrarily different activities in which human beings engage, all of which have their own ramifications both for what people count as their happiness, and for what it takes to effect what they so count, it is hard to believe that there *could* be an Art of Life. The rules, skills and so on that make up the prescriptive dimension of an art exploit the distinctive features of a narrowly constrained domain; thus, where there is no narrowly constrained domain being picked out, the notion of a *techne* loses its grip. (Analogously, there is no such thing as a method for solving problems in general, as opposed to some particular sort of problem: problems come in too many substantively different shapes for that to be a possibility.)³²

With those doubts registered, however, we can turn to the question of what is required for there to be an Art of Life, as Mill understands it. Evidently, it involves a very delicate balancing act, in that happiness or utility must simultaneously satisfy two competing constraints. On the one hand, if I'm right about Mill's mature conception of utility, it is only a goal or end in a rather thin sense. All of the practical guidance is given by the goods which, in a particular case, compose it, and by the relatively sparse stable priority relations that can be identified among them. If the priority relations among a cluster of ends are not tightly enough defined, it will not be possible to derive sufficiently definite guidance from them to constitute an art.³³

³²Human beings implement the strategy of colonizing one niche after another in their shared natural and social environment, by developing highly specialized systems of representation and of standards. These local standards and representational vocabularies are tailored to the various niches, and support *technai* or arts. Thus, in my own view, Mill is making a very common philosophical mistake, that of treating the world as a whole as though it were a niche in an ecosystem. For further discussion, see Millgram, forthcoming.

I also believe Mill to be making a mistake in taking the scope of an art to be set by an antecedently specified goal. That has the order of things back-to-front: typically, it is only after one has a great of experience with a craft-like practice that one is in a position to do a reasonable job at picking out organizing goals for it.

³³This may be why Mill is willing to insist that the scope of an art is picked out by a single end: if the priority relations *are* tightly enough specified, then it will be possible to treat the cluster of ends as a single complex end.

That said, this last chapter of the *System* contains an argument, usually attributed to Sidgwick, which suggests that when Mill wrote it he had not yet thought through the apparatus he later deployed in *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*:

On the other hand, since a Millian art is defined by its goal, and since life is everything that one does, an Art of Life built around a single substantive goal, one capable of univocally determining all of one's choices over the course of one's life, would presuppose a substantive highest pleasure. We have seen that substantive highest pleasures are to be avoided at pretty much all costs, and so if utility *is* a single, substantive goal, there had better not be an Art of Life, after all.

There are arts—for example, medicine, architecture, and even, perhaps, philosophy—whose goals resemble Millian utility in substantively amounting to and functioning as a cluster or basket of goals, the priority and tradeoff relations among which are only occasionally defined.³⁴ For instance, although the defining goal of architecture is (I suppose) to design and erect good buildings, one architect may prioritize style over convenience, where another prioritizes functionality or price. However, different conceptions of good building have a large common denominator, and so there are practical precepts to be had that most or all architects will find serviceable. Or again, philosophical styles differ, but some tricks of the trade will be useful whatever sort of philosophical style you end up adopting. Accordingly, there is a repertoire of skills that one can reasonably teach in a philosophy graduate program.³⁵ If analogy is a good guide here, an Art of Life is possible only if the happiness of human beings also exhibits enough in the way of a common denominator. (And incidentally also only if their surroundings are sufficiently similar to allow for generically useful and somewhat systematizable techniques.)

Mill postponed the question of whether there *was* enough of a common denominator to his projected science of character, which he called Ethology. His sketch for that science makes it clear that its deliverances were to settle the question of just how frequently those experienced judges are going to

There must be some standard by which to determine the goodness or badness, absolute and comparative, of ends, or objects of desire. And whatever that standard is, there can be but one: for if there were several ultimate principles of conduct, the same conduct might be approved by one of those principles and condemned by another; and there would be needed some more general principle, as umpire between them. (VIII:951)

That suits a Benthamite conception of utility, on which it really does provide such a standard, but not the loosely coordinated system of standards to which utility amounts in Mill's later treatment of it.

³⁴I'm grateful to Roger Crisp for questions on this point.

³⁵However, in cases like these, one may reasonably worry whether ideology is screening from view the full range of very different possible priority relations among component goals.

agree on their preferences. Thus Ethology would also settle the question of just how much slack is built into the general utility, when it is taken as a goal. Although he never executed his long-contemplated work on the subject, I expect that at one point Mill would have imagined Ethology capable of showing the contents of the utility basket to be sufficiently coordinated to render its pursuit a potential Art.

We no longer expect Mill's science of character to be brought to fruition, but we can perhaps speak to what Mill ought to have understood the Art of Life to be. If something is to be avoided at all costs, then doing so itself amounts to a highest pleasure. We have seen that, whoever you are, having a highest pleasure is to be avoided at (pretty much) all costs. So (paradoxically, but I don't want to make a lot of hay out of the paradox) *not* having a highest pleasure should be one's highest pleasure. If there were an Art of Life—that is, waiving both my earlier qualms and the paradox I have just mentioned—it would be the technique or practice of not having a highest pleasure. Not having a highest pleasure is having a balanced character; it amounts to what we saw Mill call moral freedom. So if there *were* an Art of Life—and at this last step I am pointing to what Mill, by his own lights, should have thought, whether or not he did think it—it would be best construed as the Art of Moral Freedom.

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