

POETRY, PUSHPIN AND THE NON-INSTRUMENTAL VALUING OF NATURE IN JOHN STUART MILL'S MORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

According to Jeremy Bentham's account of happiness, pleasure is understood as homogenous, without qualitative differences between pleasures, and the relation between pleasure and its objects is understood as morally and psychologically arbitrary. John Stuart Mill's 'mental crisis' emerged as he realised the psychological impossibility of living according to this view. His recovery was aided by engagement with the poetry of Wordsworth, through which he developed the notion that the cultivation of character and sentiments is an essential element of a good life. I aim to explore Mill's engagement with Wordsworth, and shed light on how Mill felt able to reconcile hedonic utilitarianism with his new view of the 'inner life' of the individual.

Keywords: Mill, Wordsworth, Utilitarianism, Nature, Poetry, Ethics

I

John Stuart Mill's nervous breakdown and recovery, according to his own account, is intimately connected with developments in his philosophy.¹ The insights that Mill offers in

¹ Some have said that Mill's reconstruction of his 'mental crisis' is not a reliable depiction (for example, it may be that an underlying condition prompted his disaffection with Benthamism, and that subsequently a more theoretical narrative was constructed to make sense of this, see Levi 1975). Although it may not give a 'complete' picture, my focus is on Mill's own account for two related reasons: firstly, his account is philosophically illuminating regardless of these concerns; secondly, it is illuminating precisely because of the ways in which Mill understands the relationships between his philosophy and his human development. Consequently, we owe it to him qua philosopher and qua

his *Autobiography* shed light on the limitations of accounts that neglect the development of character. This observation is not new, but it becomes interesting when understood in relation to the role of Wordsworth's poetry in Mill's recovery. The aims of this article are threefold: firstly to gain a better understanding of how the engagement with Wordsworth was significant in changing Mill's views on morality and psychology; secondly, to elucidate the philosophical import of Wordsworth's treatment of meaningful experiences of the natural world; and thirdly, to suggest how a consideration of the distinct roles of poet and philosopher can help us to think about the apparent tension between hedonic and non-instrumental values in Mill's thought.

In section II, I provide the background to what will follow, examining Mill's description of his breakdown and recovery, and how this led Mill away from Bentham towards a qualitative account of pleasure and a focus on the cultivation of one's inner life. In section III, I discuss the role that Wordsworth's poetry played in Mill's recovery, and how this raises a tension between hedonism and non-hedonism that runs through Mill's work. In section IV, I consider how a similar tension is addressed and resolved in Wordsworth's thought, and I provide a detailed demonstration of this in section V by looking at a section from the *Prelude*. In section VI, I consider the extent to which Wordsworth's approach is compatible with Mill's philosophy, and how this relates to Mill's thoughts on poetry.

II

Mill wrote of his early years in his *Autobiography*, and it has been widely discussed since. This section does not provide novel insights about this stage in Mill's life, but supplies the background that we need in order to understand both the significance of Wordsworth's poetry to Mill, and the philosophical import of Wordsworth's own views.

human being to take his description seriously. This does not mean that we should discount other interpretations, but when it comes to characterising their own conditions, the sufferers of mental illness are often in danger of being silenced by more 'authoritative' accounts.

Mill describes the onset of his depression as an evaporation of everything that he had hitherto regarded as the aim of his existence. He had, through James Mill and Jeremy Bentham's instruction, come to identify his success in life with realising utilitarian goals. For some years he had taken to this project with a quasi-religious zeal, but in 1826 he 'awakened from this as from a dream':

In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, "suppose that all your objects in life were realized ... would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.²

Mill chooses the words of Coleridge to articulate his condition during this time:

A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,
A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet or relief
In word, or sigh, or tear.³

This might be compared with a loss of religious faith, in response to which the subject encounters a void or a lack of purpose. The 'unimpassioned' griever can find no 'natural outlet', since all objects have been stripped of the importance that would allow them to serve as such. Mill experienced a loss of what had until then been the primary source of significant possibilities in his life.

² Mill (1873) p113.

³ Coleridge, S.T. 'Dejection: An Ode', Quoted by Mill in *ibid.* p. 114.

But what was the worldview from which Mill found himself alienated? It may be instructive to employ Robert Nozick's distinction between 'moral pull' and 'moral push'.⁴ Theories that draw heavily on 'moral push' emphasise the person who is the subject of a moral life, their character and motivations. An emphasis on moral pull focuses on entities in the world 'outside' of the moral agent as a source of value that generates obligations which exert a 'pull' on the agent.

In grounding his life in Benthamite utilitarianism, with its foundation in what Nozick sees as 'moral pull', Mill placed the focus of value 'in the world', at a step removed from what he experienced as the locus of his subjectivity. He was able for a time to maintain this by identifying his happiness with the broader project of maximising utility, 'through placing my happiness in something durable and distant, in which some progress might be always making, while it could never be exhausted by complete attainment'.⁵ This was in keeping with James Mill's view that 'the object of education should be to form the strongest possible associations of the salutary class; associations of pleasure with all things beneficial to the great whole, and of pain with all things hurtful to it.'⁶ But with the loss of significance of this 'great whole', Mill appears to have experienced a loss of his identity: the identification of his own happiness with something 'durable and distant' proved unsustainable. Mill writes explicitly about how this identification of oneself entirely with projects that lie outside of the self is insufficient if the individual is to live a good human life, and explains how it eventually formed part of his new 'theory of life':

I, for the first time, gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual. I ceased to attach almost exclusive importance to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the human being for speculation and for action. I had now learnt by experience

⁴ Nozick (1981), Chapter 5.

⁵ Mill (1873) pp. 112-3.

⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

that the passive susceptibilities needed to be cultivated as well as the active capacities, and required to be nourished and enriched as well as guided.⁷

Mill articulates his new conception of wellbeing in a variety of ways, but the cultivation of character features strongly in his subsequent thought, expressed either through the language of higher pleasures in *Utilitarianism* or through the emphasis on the importance of liberty for self-development in *On Liberty*.

The account of pleasure held by James Mill and Bentham can be expressed in the famous slogan ‘pushpin is as good as poetry’. For Bentham, all pleasures are equal in quality. This means that morally speaking, Bentham regards pleasure as homogenous. This connects to Bentham and James Mill’s view that the objects in which pleasure is taken can be viewed as both morally and psychologically arbitrary. The moral arbitrariness of the object of pleasure is often cited as a serious problem for Benthamite utilitarianism, in that it allows us to count pleasure taken in the suffering of others as having positive value, even if in many cases this is outweighed by the negative value of the suffering caused.⁸ This is part of a wider concern that things (and people) are taken as merely instrumentally valuable.

Bentham’s view that goodness could be understood only in terms of the propensity to cause pleasure led to an account whereby no objects in the world could be understood to be good except insofar as they produced pleasure in the creature experiencing them. This represents at once a linking, and in other ways a decoupling, of the notions of goodness and pleasure. By such an account there can be no goodness without pleasure, but there is no sense in which we can deem it *appropriate* to take certain types of pleasure in particular types of things, except to the extent that doing so is liable to result in further pleasure, either for ourselves or for others. In this sense, the link between pleasure and the object of pleasure is arbitrary. Mill connected this to a psychological thesis, which he holds to be evident in both

⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

⁸ This issue has been widely explored. See for example Nussbaum, M (2004) and Scarre (1996).

Bentham and James Mill, that the relationship between the experience of pleasure and the objects in which pleasure is taken is merely associative:

My course of study had led me to believe, that all mental and moral feelings and qualities ... were the results of association; that we love one thing and hate another, take pleasure from one sort of action or contemplation, and pain in another sort, through the clinging of pleasurable or painful ideas to those things, from the effect of education or experience.⁹

This makes possible the view that ‘the object of education should be to form the strongest possible associations of the salutary class’. According to Mill’s account, this led to the sense that the project itself was empty: the happiness that Mill wished to attain from it was only ‘casually’ connected with its aims. Mill could equally have chosen a different ‘durable and distant’ ‘ordering of outward circumstances’ with which to identify, and the recognition of this led, as Mill recounts it, to a distance from his projects and inward character.

III

On a first glance at Mill’s later remarks about Wordsworth, it seems difficult to grasp why this poet in particular would have a curative effect on Mill. He describes him as never ‘*possessed* by any feeling’¹⁰, and as guilty of ‘bad philosophy’.¹¹ I hope to show that the ‘bad philosophy’ is tangential to the function that Wordsworth served for Mill, and that what Mill regards as a pallidness of feeling is an essential part of what allowed him to serve such a function. I will do this with reference to the related concepts of Aristotelian *phronesis* and the idea of an emotional vision of the world.

Wordsworth allows Mill to see the possibility of an alternative to what he regards as a strongly externalist account of value in Bentham’s utilitarianism by demonstrating how one might cultivate certain feelings:

⁹ Mill (1873) p. 115.

¹⁰ Mill (1833) p. 359.

¹¹ Mill (1873) p. 126.

What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of feelings, that I was in quest of.¹²

The effect of Wordsworth was to express the way in which the poetic sensibilities could be aroused by natural beauty.¹³ The notion of expression, rather than explanation, is important, since there is good reason to suppose that reading Wordsworth had an effect on Mill which could not have been achieved through ideas outlined in a philosophical text, something that I will elaborate on in the final section.

This might draw us to conclude that the important thing at work is not so much the beauty in the natural landscape itself, but rather the poetic medium, and the sensibilities that Mill felt he had lacked due to the nature of his childhood and education. If this is correct, the beauty of natural landscapes is only valuable to the reader to the extent that it is a trigger for the poetic sentiments, the 'higher pleasures' with which Mill is concerned.

As we shall see, this move is too quick, and misconceives the nature of the higher pleasures: to make it would be to associate Mill with the prior Benthamite psychology whereby the objects of pleasure are regarded as arbitrary, and only the pleasures themselves as significant. The valuer cannot simply decouple the value of the objects from the pleasure that he takes in them. They cannot be valued merely because they evoke certain poetic sentiments. To view them thus would be to reopen the bottomless pit that Mill experienced as the loss of significance in his life where nothing could have value beyond the valuing response itself.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ This is associated for Mill, as for Wordsworth, with social and political progress. The passage above continues:

In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared by all human beings; which had no connexion with struggle or imperfection, but which would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed. (ibid.)

This aspect of the revelation relates to developments in Mill's thought concerning the inter-relationship between individual self-cultivation and the improvement of human life taken as a whole, clearly evident in *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*.

Nonetheless, it appears difficult to avoid this in the light of Mill's contention, famously expressed in *On Liberty*, that utility is 'the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions'.¹⁴ Mill's reaction to Wordsworth is thus one way of revealing a tension, often commented on by Mill scholars, between hedonism and non-hedonism.¹⁵

IV

A different way in which the value of nature might be perceived to be nothing more than instrumental can be found if we look to some interpretations of Wordsworth himself. On one interpretation, we might suppose that the value of natural objects for Wordsworth lies not so much in the objects themselves, but in their role in granting us access to a transcendent realm in which the unity of nature can be apprehended. This has been a source of criticism from some of Wordsworth's harshest contemporary critics. According to Frances Jeffrey, the effect of Wordsworth and his associates is to 'introduce us to beings whose existence was not previously suspected by the acutest observers of nature: and excite an interest in them ... more by an eloquent and refined analysis of their own capricious feelings, than by any obvious or intelligible ground of sympathy in their situation.'¹⁶

To think about what 'beings' Jeffrey has in mind, we should consider that Wordsworth is sometimes described as being 'Platonic' in his outlook on nature. In his ode 'Intimations of Immortality', an important work for Mill, Wordsworth begins:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;

¹⁴ Mill (1859) p. 15.

¹⁵ E.g. Nussbaum (2004)

¹⁶ Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, April 1808, quoted in Pite (2003).

Turn whereso'er I may,

By night or day,

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.¹⁷

This has been associated with Plato's view that the child has a memory of the forms, which fades in later life. In Wordsworth's case, the childhood experience of nature reveals a truth and beauty that can only occasionally be grasped at as one grows older. Key to gaining these fleeting insights is an engagement with the natural landscape. Urban life represents a confusion of impermanence; it is only through a slower paced life in rural surroundings that one experiences a form of stability and constancy, 'because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.'¹⁸

Plato's influence is certainly significant here, and we might take Wordsworth to be attempting to evoke a transcendent realm beyond the phenomenal world, of which we can only grasp vague intimations through flashes of emotional inspiration. It is this realm with which the poet, like the child, is particularly in touch, and able to convey through verse. Wordsworth emphasises a sense of the unity of all things that can be experienced through nature, and the role of this in creating a sense of the fellowship of mankind, which is itself part of that unity.

As this stands, it might seem as though what is significant is the relationship in which the person, and humanity, stands to the universality of nature, a transcendent wholeness that lies beyond the value of the particularity of the individual experience and the objects experienced. The object in the natural world, like the poetry that describes it and the poet's communion with it, would be a mere medium through which eternal truth and beauty can be evoked. The value would not lie in the natural world of a moral being's experience, but at a step beyond. The pleasures taken in mountains, trees, lakes and the changing seasons would

¹⁷ Wordsworth (1807).

¹⁸ Wordsworth (1800).

then be valuable to the poet and his audience not for their own sakes, but for the sake of the human apprehension of an overall unity in creation. This differs significantly from Bentham, but it might be said that this is still an account whereby objects in the natural world can only be valuable instrumentally.

Mill describes 'Intimations of Immortality' as 'falsely called Platonic'¹⁹. Given the context that this remark occupies in the *Autobiography*, we might take it as comment on the idea that Wordsworth's poems are supposed to reflect the transcendent picture just described. Wordsworth's poetry undoubtedly reflects Platonic notions. It is partly a quiet reflective focus on stable and permanent forms, rather than dramatic change, that leads Mill to contrast Wordsworth with Shelley, and describe the former as 'the poet of unpoetical nature, possessed of quiet and contemplative tastes'.²⁰ While there are Platonic elements in this, it is the possibility of engagement of this kind that leads us from a distant inaccessible world of forms toward a sense that what is truthful and beautiful is immanent; made manifest in our lived experience of the natural world:

Instead of meaningless differences, random variety and blank confusion, the setting of life in rural England conveyed a sense of order and permanence, of change within stable and predictable limits. In this sense Renaissance Platonism lived on in Wordsworth's poetry, with the Forms now drawn down from the transcendent realm and objectified in rocks, mountains, lakes and forests.

Wordsworth's own verse expresses that idea gracefully and powerfully:

Ye Presences of Nature in the sky
And on earth! Ye visions of the hills!
And soul of lonely places! Can I think
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed

¹⁹ Mill (1873) p. 126

²⁰ Ibid.

Such ministry, when ye through many a year
Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
On caves and trees, upon woods and hills,
Impressed upon all forms the characters
Of danger or desire; and thus did make
The surface of the universal earth
With triumph and delight, with hope and fear,
Work like a sea?²¹

The idea of Forms ‘drawn down from the transcendent realm’ and ‘objectified’ in particulars suggests that Wordsworth is influenced by Aristotelianism as well as by Platonism:

Wordsworth suggests here that the essences of things, far from being unknown, are both accessible and can cause mental effects. These essences or qualities are “latent” within things. Wordsworth makes the same point in “Tintern Abbey,” where he writes that “[...] with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things.” The life of things is inherent in them and not extrinsic.²²

The unity of nature as Wordsworth perceives and evokes it cannot be something that lies beyond or apart from the particular things. We can only get a sense of the unity of nature by contemplating the unique features of particulars, and the ways in which they are interconnected:

Wordsworth’s imagination was truly earthbound; reality to him was what was real before him, and this was not merely an indication of some more transcendent reality.

The tall rock,

²¹ Hinchman and Hinchman (2007) pp. 340-341. The lines are from book I of the *Prelude*, lines 464-475.

²² Josua (2006) p. 513. Lines from ‘Tintern Abbey’, 48-50.

The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,

Their colours and their forms

Were not symbols of a mystic universe; they themselves were the reality whose deep significance can be apprehended by contemplation of their inter-connexion (or 'interfusion', to use the poet's own word).²³

Rather than coming to associate pleasure with certain objects and experiences merely for the sake of realising some further aim, the moral being apprehending nature must take seriously the significance inherent in the object itself, as it presents itself in their experience. This is not easily articulated, since an attempt at articulation is liable to describe the significance in terms of a theoretical abstraction that will fall short of the 'romantic' experience. This applies equally to the aim of cultivating romantic sensibilities as it does to pursuing one's happiness understood in a more Benthamite sense.

There are elements of Wordsworth's thought, described in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which appear distinctly Benthamite. For example, Wordsworth emphasised the role of repeated association in the poet's developing certain emotional responses to subjects. However, these associations are developed through the contemplation of the subjects in question, which reveals 'what is really important to men':

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits,

²³ Woods (1961) pp. 54-55. Lines from 'Tintern Abbey', 77-79.

we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.²⁴

This two-way communication between thought and feeling, combined with the view that the unity in nature is inherent in the specific features of particulars, means that while one's inner life can be cultivated and refined through habit and repetition, the association of pleasures with their objects is neither homogenous nor arbitrary. There is an associationist psychology at play, as with Bentham, but the role of association is to reveal and reinforce what was already significant or meaningful, not to create significance or meaning in the first place. Again, we may see echoes of an Aristotelian ethic and psychology, with its emphasis on *phronesis*. Practical wisdom for Aristotle, in line with his views on essence, consists in attentiveness to particulars, as well as in wisdom concerning universal truths, and is something that comes to be acquired through practice and experience in dealing with those particulars.²⁵

Additionally, part of what it means to be a poet is to have developed a capacity for responding appropriately to appropriate stimuli, and for conveying this. There needs to be a proper 'fit' between the objects concerned, and the nature of the one who apprehends them. In relation to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Cora Diamond remarks that

The poet's representation of a person under the influence of such a feeling [the 'essential passions of the heart'] can excite in us a feeling appropriate both to what is

²⁴ Wordsworth (1800) p. 8.

²⁵ See, for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a:

'Whereas young people become accomplished in geometry and mathematics, and wise within these limits, prudent young people do not seem to be found. The reason is that prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it.'

being described and to our own nature, the appropriateness being something we can come to recognize in part through the kind of pleasure such a poem gives.²⁶

Phronesis is not a goal for the individual, any more than happiness can be a goal for a person without something in which their happiness can be taken. The valued object has to stand independently of this.²⁷ Thus it is not a project such as the cultivation of romantic sentiments (or Benthamite utilitarianism) that is the proper object of an individual's value. For Aristotle, ethical understanding is practical, and not merely conceptual. For him, as for Wordsworth, our feelings are 'directed by our thoughts', and our thoughts are refined and developed through the cultivation of our feelings. Practical wisdom cannot be fully articulated, it must be lived and evoked. We come to such an understanding through practice, and through learning from those who appear to possess it. This may help us to understand the importance of Mill's remark that Wordsworth's poetry showed him 'the very culture of feelings' that he was 'in quest of'.

In this sense, Wordsworth served as a model of practical wisdom for Mill. This is not to say that Wordsworth's theoretical remarks about the role of the poet impressed Mill on an intellectual level. Rather, it was an example of practical wisdom in the true Aristotelian sense: an evocation of a life well lived, rather than a theoretical instruction manual. As Mill puts it:

I found that he too had had similar experience to mine; that he also had felt that the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of life was not lasting; but that he had sought for compensation, and found it, in the way in which he was now teaching me to find it.²⁸

Here we see another important feature of what it might be for someone to serve as a model of practical wisdom: any role-model must not merely show us that something is possible, but also show us how it is possible *for us*. In the *Autobiography*, Mill tells us that it was

²⁶ Diamond (1991) p. 298.

²⁷ See Simon James' response to Holmes Rolson III's charge that virtue ethics is egoistic and anthropocentric in James (2006).

²⁸ Mill (1873) p. 126.

Wordsworth's 'unpoetical nature' that made his poetry so helpful: 'unpoetical natures are precisely those which require poetic cultivation. This cultivation Wordsworth is far more fitted to give, than poets who are intrinsically far more poets than he'.²⁹ What Mill means by an 'unpoetical nature' can be elucidated by looking at his 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties'. A poetical nature is that of someone whose strong and deep feelings govern the succession of their thoughts. By contrast, Mill views someone with an 'unpoetical nature' as lacking in this intensity, because their thoughts are always the guiding force. For Wordsworth (Mill maintains) 'the poetry is almost always the mere setting of a thought', in contrast to Shelley, for whom 'voluntary mental discipline has done little', but for whom 'unity of feeling [is] the harmonizing principle which a central idea is to minds of another class'. It is Wordsworth's primacy of ideas over emotions that seems to have allowed Mill to see a possibility of escape from his predicament. He was, as we have seen, in a state where feeling seemed close to impossible, and in which practical possibilities seemed bleached out of his life. Wordsworth showed Mill how one could excite feelings through the conjunction and contemplation of associated thoughts:

What he is impressed with, and what he is anxious to impress, is some proposition, more or less distinctly conceived; some truth, or something which he deems such. He lets the thought dwell in his mind, til it excites, as is the nature of thought, other thoughts, and also such feelings as the measure of his sensibility is adequate to supply.³⁰

This perceived feature of Wordsworth made it possible for Mill to see how someone *like him*, devoid of passion, but with an abundance of intellectual training and ideas, to summon up experiences of pleasure in response to the natural world. It also accounts for why Mill grew 'to value Wordsworth less according to his intrinsic merits, than by the measure of what he

²⁹ Mill (1873) p. 126.

³⁰ Mill (1833) p. 358.

had done for me'³¹. Once it became possible to find sources of joy in the world, other poetry acquired a greater lustre.

V

The foregoing discussion highlighted a tension apparent in much romantic art and literature between the value of the poetic sensibilities apprehending beauty in nature and the notion of celebrating nature as something that stands apart from us. We can see a good illustration of this in book six of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, published a quarter of a century after Mill's mental crisis, but before Mill published *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism* or the *Autobiography*:

That very day,
From a bare ridge we also first beheld
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
To have a soulless image on the eye
That had usurped upon a living thought
That never more could be.³²

Here it initially appears that nature has not 'done its job' in terms of what the romantic might expect from it. The 'soulless image' does not wed itself to thought or feeling in the way that Wordsworth conveys in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The long anticipated summit is an apex in geographical terms alone. But then:

The wondrous Vale
Of Chamouny stretched far below, and soon
With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice,
A motionless array of mighty waves,
Five rivers broad and vast, made rich amends,

³¹ Mill (1873) p. 126.

³² Wordsworth (1850) p. 157.

And reconciled us to realities³³

It is the *particularity* of this experience of nature, not nature mediated through an abstract idea, which delivers the lessons that Wordsworth had sought. The poet requires an ‘unripe state’ of the mind and emotions, unencumbered by a consciousness of a pre-set conceptual framework, to reap the fullness of such an experience. The view of the summit had been anticipated, but the unexpectedness of the frozen rivers alerted the travellers to a particularity which had not already been incorporated into a predetermined schema:

Whate’er in this wide circuit we beheld,
Or heard, was fitted to our unripe state
Of intellect and heart. With such a book
Before our eyes, we could not choose but read
Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain
And universal reason of mankind,
The truths of young and old.³⁴

So the aim cannot be the cultivation of romantic sensibilities and thoughts, since these can only come when one focuses on the reality of nature, rather than to a world of thoughts or forms or ideas that lies behind it. This isn’t a bare transcendent reality ‘in itself’, divorced from our perception, but it is something that is *experienced* as ‘other’, and as indifferent to our projects. The abstract lessons that we can glean from natural scenes and objects are a function of valuing those things in their particularity, and not learnt in terms of something that the things represent. This means that the value of nature ‘for its own sake’ cannot, in practical terms, be separated from the human experience of apprehending it. In relation to the Ode *Intimations of Immortality*, which moved Mill the most, Thomas Woods remarks that,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 157-158.

It is human feeling and not an apocalyptic vision of a world beyond the one we know that endows our reality with significance and pathos. ... It is the continuing presence of man that gives the world its true meaning:

The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's immortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears³⁵

The fact that 'the world' in question is the world of our experience, not one that lies beyond it, helps us to make sense of what Wordsworth means when he talks about 'the passions of men' being 'incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'. These forms, being immanent in the world of our experience, become incorporated in our lives, just as we come to see ourselves as 'interfused' with nature. The value of nature is inseparable from the experience of valuing it and from the life of the one who values. It is unsurprising that Mill found in Wordsworth a way through his depression. The natural world, presented by Wordsworth, becomes a 'component of a life'.³⁶ Its value is already situated in the world of the one who values, rather than as a 'durable and distant' 'ordering of outward circumstances' from which one can detach one's commitment. If we take this seriously, Nozick's distinction between 'moral push' and 'moral pull' begins to dissolve. The 'external'

³⁵ Woods (1961) p. 57.

³⁶ It is unclear how far Mill follows this thought, although it does not appear obviously incompatible with his moral and political outlook. There is some precedent for this view in the interpretation of Mill according to which liberty is valuable partly in virtue of its status as a 'component of a life' (rather than as instrumentally or intrinsically valuable). See Rachels and Ruddick, W. (1989). For a comparison (using Rachels' and Ruddick's reading of Mill) between the roles of environment and of liberty in human lives, see McKinnell (2011).

world of our experience, upon which we act, also has a role in the constitution of our inner life, and vice versa.³⁷

VI

This notion - that the non-instrumental value of nature cannot be divorced from the moral being valuing (or potentially valuing) it - helps to reconcile the romantic tension between the sensibilities of the poet and nature 'for its own sake', but it is a further question whether it would enable Mill to reconcile the view that utility is the ultimate appeal on all moral questions with his conviction about the importance of the 'inner life' and the commitment to non-hedonic values that this seems to entail. Mill describes two conclusions which he developed when emerging from his period of depression in 1827. Firstly that

the enjoyments of life ... are sufficient to make it a pleasant thing, when they are taken *en passant*, without having been made a principle object. Once make them so, and they are immediately felt to be insufficient. They will not bear a scrutinizing examination. Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you will cease to be so.³⁸

Mill, like Aristotle, thought that enjoyment must have an object for the one who experiences it, which goes beyond enjoyment itself. Thus the utilitarian must leave room for people to have goals that stand apart from merely hedonic ones. Secondly, Mill's new attention 'among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual' includes a newfound interest in the way that one's character allows the world to affect one's experience, through the cultivation and enrichment of the 'passive susceptibilities' as well as the 'active capacities'. Wordsworth's poetry, focused as it is on the way that natural beauty could impress itself upon one without an active project or goal in mind, allowed Mill to see a way to having values in life which were not held *for the sake of* maximising happiness.

³⁸ Mill (1873) pp. 120-1.

One might argue from this that insofar as he adopts this approach, Mill is jettisoning utilitarianism, which must be based on hedonic principles. In places Mill appears to adopt the Aristotelian view that happiness consists of the flourishing of a life, rather than simply the experience of pleasure. He seems to be approaching this in *On Liberty*, where he argues that utility should be understood ‘in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.’³⁹ However, in *Utilitarianism*, Mill unequivocally states that

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.⁴⁰

In addition, Mill does not go as far as Wordsworth in terms of the view that poetry represents a truth in the world, which is inextricably bound up with the poet’s sentiments. In his ‘Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties’, Mill maintains that ‘The poetry is not in the object itself, nor in the scientific truth itself, but in the state of mind in which the one and the other may be contemplated.’⁴¹ What the poet does, so far as Mill is concerned, is not to reveal a truth or a mind-independent source of value in the world, but rather to evoke a way of looking at it, coloured by certain emotions, and of a distinct kind from the kinds of propositional knowledge to be revealed through science or philosophy:

The object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions; and therein is poetry sufficiently distinguished from what Wordsworth affirms to be its logical opposite, namely, not prose, but matter of fact or science. The one addresses itself to the belief, the other to the feelings. The one does its work by convincing or persuading, the other

³⁹ Mill (1859) p. 15.

⁴⁰ Mill (1861) p. 278.

⁴¹ Mill (1833) p. 347.

by moving. The one acts by presenting a proposition to the understanding, the other by offering interesting objects of contemplation to the sensibilities.⁴²

The work of the poet has a different aim (in Mill's view) to that of the philosopher. The philosopher aims at 'convincing or persuading': the poet's aim is to illuminate and convey aspects of a rich emotional vision of the world. The moral philosopher can argue for the ethical importance of this vision, but it is the poet who can reveal it to the person who seeks to live a better life. While Mill understands that this has moral significance, he does not go as far as many later thinkers, most notably Iris Murdoch, who maintains that emotional 'moral vision' of this kind is part of the work of moral philosophy, and that such vision is connected with a truthful view of its object as much as it is with justice.

Nonetheless for Mill, poetry should be truthful in its depiction, not of its object, but of the inner life of the poet: 'The lion may be described falsely or with exaggeration, and the poetry be all the better; but if the human emotion be not painted with unscrupulous truth, the poetry is bad poetry, *i.e.* is not poetry at all, but a failure'.⁴³ Moreover, the vision of the world that we gain through poetry is not misleading, or an illusion, but perfectly compatible with veridical perception. In recounting a debate with John Arthur Roebuck, Mill recalls that

It was in vain I urged on him that the imaginative emotion which an idea, when vividly conceived, excites in us, is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects; and far from implying anything erroneous or delusive in our mental apprehension of the object, is quite consistent with the most accurate knowledge and most perfect practical recognition of all its physical and intellectual laws and relations. The intensest feeling of the beauty of a cloud lighted by the setting sun, is no hindrance to my knowing that the cloud is vapour of water, subject to all the laws of vapours in a state of suspension; and I am just as likely to allow for, and act

⁴² Ibid. p. 334.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 347.

on, these physical laws wherever there is occasion to do so, as if I had been incapable of perceiving any distinction between beauty and ugliness.⁴⁴

Mill does not see a tension between utilitarianism and his new view of the inner life of the individual: in *On Liberty* he tellingly refers to ‘the judicious utilitarianism of Aristotle’.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, it has been argued that such a tension exists, and forces Mill at once to accept, and at the same time to deny, non-hedonic values.⁴⁶ Martha Nussbaum articulates this in terms of Mill being ‘torn’ between a non-hedonic Wordsworthian / Aristotelian influence and a hedonic Benthamite one, suggesting that these accounts of happiness are irreconcilable.⁴⁷

I would contend that this problem is overemphasised, and that this fact can be illuminated through contrasting the role of the poet and the role of the philosopher. According to many plausible readings, Mill’s reformed account of utility resembles a modified version of an Aristotelian account, whereby the deepest and most sustainable forms of happiness are to be found in the fulfilment of one’s capacities over the course of a life.⁴⁸ This allows experiences which are not themselves hedonically satisfying to be incorporated into an overall structure of a life, insofar as they ultimately contribute to the development of a character capable of experiencing higher pleasures. An important aspect of this, as with the Aristotelian strand in Wordsworth’s thought, is that such experiences must be encountered and developed without a constant conscious goal of maximising utility. The sources of the greatest pleasure throughout our lives are the frozen rivers that we encounter when we are not engaging in a project of self-improvement, and specifically when we are not doing moral philosophy. The poet can help us to develop and refine the capacity for this kind of experience.

⁴⁴ Mill (1873) pp. 128-9. Note that Mill may be making an oblique reference to Wordsworth’s ‘The clouds that gather round the setting sun’ in *Intimations of Immortality*.

⁴⁵ Mill (1859) p. 29.

⁴⁶ See for example Anderson (1991), and Nussbaum (2004).

⁴⁷ Nussbaum (2004).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Donner (1991). For a view that pushes the neo-Aristotelian line considerably further, see Semmel (1984).

The difficulty does not lie in the acceptance of non-hedonic values – on a sympathetic interpretation, Mill's new 'theory of life' suggests that valuing non-instrumentally is the only way that we can develop the capacity to experience the most meaningful and fulfilling pleasures. This is not a case of believing in values that are not really there, since (for Mill) valuing in this emotional sense is distinct from a propositional belief about the nature of value in objects.

Rather, there are more localised problems: how can Mill experience the pleasures that he speaks of, when his theoretical commitment holds that non-hedonic values are significant only in terms of hedonic ones? How, relatedly, is it possible for Mill's philosophy to give meaningful voice to such experiences, when their value to him as a philosopher is distinct from the kind of value that they would hold for him as a human being in the moment that he experiences them? The problem seems to lie not so much with tensions in Mill's thought, but in tensions between thinking it and living it at the same time.

Mill is committed to the cultivation of the capacity for higher pleasures, but philosophy cannot inform us fully about what it is like to experience such pleasures, or how to cultivate such a capacity. Here the philosopher must wave to the poet, who can enter the gaps that philosophy cannot fill. The injunction that the poet should 'show, not tell' is comparable with the notion of being a model of Aristotelian practical wisdom, and at the same time an injunction to do what theoretical philosophy is precisely not in the business of doing. As Aristotle says:

'So it is correct to say that it is by doing just actions that one becomes just, and by doing temperate actions temperate; without doing them, no one would have even a chance of becoming good. But the masses do not do them. They take refuge in argument, thinking that they are being philosophers and that this is the way to be good. They are rather like patients who listen carefully to their doctors, but do not do

what they are told. Just as such a treatment will not make the patients healthy in body, so being this kind of philosopher will not make the masses healthy in soul.’⁴⁹

One might think, then, that when it comes to giving practical guidance for living, philosophy must give way altogether, and leave the poets to guide us instead. But Mill’s view of the development of the capacity for higher pleasure, over the course of a life, leaves room for both, while retaining the distinction. The good Aristotelian might spend a considerable amount of time reflecting on the nature of the good, but most of their actions and interactions will stem from emotion and habit: a good life will require both of these elements to some extent. Similarly, we might say that for Mill, one requires the guidance and direction given by utilitarian philosophy, as well as the evocation and modelling of pleasures into which the poet can give insight.

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⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 2, ch. 4.

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