

# Love, Poetry, and the Good Life: Mill's *Autobiography* & Perfectionist Ethics<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Clark

## Abstract

I argue for a perfectionist reading of Mill's account of the good life, by using the failures of development recorded in his *Autobiography* as a way to understand his official account of happiness in *Utilitarianism*. This work offers both a new perspective on Mill's thought, and a distinctive account of the role of aesthetic and emotional capacities in the most choiceworthy human life. I consider the philosophical purposes of autobiography, Mill's disagreements with Bentham, and the nature of competent judges and the pleasure they take in higher culture. I conclude that Millian perfectionism is an attractive and underappreciated option for contemporary value theory.

## I. Introduction

What is Mill's account of the good life, and is it of any use to us? Both of these questions invite obvious answers: first, Mill is a complex hedonist. That is, he agrees with Bentham that the good life—the life which goes best for the person whose life it is, which is most choiceworthy for those we care about including ourselves<sup>2</sup>—is the life which has the greatest possible balance of pleasure over pain. Mill differs from Bentham's simple hedonism only in thinking that Bentham's list of good-makers for pleasures is incomplete: pleasures can be evaluated and compared not only by intensity, duration, etc.<sup>3</sup>, but also by their distinctive phenomenal quality. That quality can be distinguished by competent judges of pleasure: people who have experience of different kinds of pleasure, who can therefore make authoritative pairwise comparisons between pleasures. Mill further claims that such judges will choose, and thus identify as more valuable, the higher pleasures of elite culture—poetry, philosophy, active citizenship—over the lower pleasures of consumption, spectacle, and selfishness.<sup>4</sup>

But—turning to my second question—this account is implausible, not least because the higher/lower pleasures distinction encapsulates Victorian cultural prejudice, not anything about humans in general. Mill might have preferred Wordsworth to music hall and the debating society to the pub; I might prefer Keith Jarrett to Britney Spears and Evelyn Waugh to Dan Brown; but these are at best idiosyncrasies of taste and upbringing, and perhaps revelations of class-conscious snobbery. So, Mill's account of the good life should be rejected. Hedonism is a minority position in contemporary value theory, but even those who hold it<sup>5</sup> reject Mill's version of it.

My alternative answers to these questions are: Mill can profitably be read as a perfectionist; Millian perfectionism is an appealing account of the good life for us. For Mill on this reading, the good life is the life in which one fully develops and uses one's human and individual potential; in which one's distinctive capacities are brought to full expression; in which one flourishes as a human being and as the particular person one is. Just as the successful life for an oak is to grow from acorn to healthy, spreading tree, so the best life for a human is to grow into flourishing adulthood. Mill's use for us is that he reveals some of the particular capacities which constitute flourishing—for humans, not just for Victorian do-gooders (like Mill) or the sons of bourgeois academic households (like me). In what follows, I make my case for those answers by offering a rereading of Mill's *Autobiography*.

## II. Purposes of Autobiography

An autobiography is not just a record of events or a transparent window into a character. Like all self-narrations, autobiographies shape the narrator as well as being shaped by her; like all public speech-acts, published autobiographies are intended to do things to and with their audiences. People write autobiographies for reasons, and those reasons shape what they reveal and what they don't, and what they mean to *do* with their own life stories. For instance: an autobiography can be an attempt at self-justification (think of Rousseau's *Confessions*), or an attempt to understand and tame some transforming life event (think of Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*), or a moral and political intervention (think of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*).

Mill's *Autobiography* is openly intended to have more than personal significance<sup>6</sup>. In its first paragraph, he writes that 'I do not for a moment imagine that any part of what I have to relate can be interesting to the public as a narrative or as being connected with myself<sup>7</sup>. Mill doesn't think anyone would be interested in his life just as *his*, and repeatedly insists that he's nothing special. As he later says about his intellectual achievements: 'What I could do, could assuredly be done by any boy or girl of average capacity and healthy physical constitution<sup>8</sup>. Mill writes, as he presents it, with three purposes in mind. First, 'I have thought that in an age in which education and its improvement are the subject of more, if not of profounder, study than at any former period of English history, it may be useful that there should be some record of an education which was unusual and remarkable<sup>9</sup>. Mill intends to weigh the success and failure of his father's educational theory as it was tried out on him. Second, 'It has also seemed to me that in an age of transition in opinions, there may be somewhat both of interest and of benefit in noting the successive phases of any mind which was always pressing forward<sup>10</sup>. Third, 'But a motive which weighs more with me than either of these, is a desire to make acknowledgment of the debts which my intellectual and moral development owes to other persons; some of them of recognized eminence, others less known than they deserve to be, and the one to whom most of all is due, one whom the world had no opportunity of knowing<sup>11</sup>. Mill also intends to acknowledge his debts to the major shapers of his growth: his father, Bentham, Romantics like Wordsworth and Carlyle, and—most importantly—his lover and eventual wife Harriet Taylor.

The thread that runs through all three of these reasons for writing is development: *human* development, not just Mill's development. *Autobiography's* topic is the ways in which a human—'any boy or girl'—can be cultivated, grow, and flower; or

can fail to grow, and be left stunted and incomplete. My suggestion is that Mill is using his own life as an exemplar for a general account of the good life and of the social and personal conditions which are necessary to it. *Autobiography* dramatizes a perfectionist account of the good life, with Mill's own life as example and warning. It's an example, because that life shows what development is possible with the right educational conditions; but it's also a warning, because it also shows the ways in which development can be thwarted, and a human life made worse than it might have been. A perfectionist ethic must answer the question, *which capacities* are those whose full expression and use constitute flourishing? I'm now going to follow Mill in focusing on *failures* of development as a way of answering that question.

### III. Failures of Development

The warning element in *Autobiography* is Mill's description of the parts of flourishing which his early life and education failed to cultivate. Mill was intensively educated at home to be the best possible advocate for James Mill and Bentham's greatest happiness principle, and for the radical social, legal and political change it demanded. By the time he was in his twenties, he was extraordinarily active for that cause as a journalist, lobbyist, and organizer. But then came the crash:

It was in the autumn of 1826. I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent; the state, I should think, in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first 'conviction of sin.' 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; 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?' 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.<sup>12</sup>

Mill's resulting period of dejection changes his views about the proper goals of his own action and of human action. He is still a consequentialist and a welfarist—he still thinks that good consequences are ultimately all that justify action, and that the measure of

good consequences is how well individual lives go—but his understanding of how an individual life can go well, or go badly, has changed. His own failures reveal previously unimagined possibilities for success.

Mill's description of his crisis, repudiation of his early projects, and eventual recovery, dramatizes two particular failures of development. First, a failure of aesthetic capacity: Mill's crisis was importantly an inability to find pleasure even in those things—books, music, debate—which he'd previously enjoyed. Second, a failure of emotional or sympathetic capacity. Mill's upbringing left him with a limited ability to respond emotionally to, for instance, his father:

The element which was chiefly deficient in his moral relation to his children was that of tenderness. I do not believe that this deficiency lay in his own nature. I believe him to have had much more feeling than he habitually showed, and much greater capacities of feeling than were ever developed. He resembled most Englishmen in being ashamed of the signs of feeling, and, by the absence of demonstration, starving the feelings themselves. If we consider further that he was in the trying position of sole teacher, and add to this that his temper was constitutionally irritable, it is impossible not to feel true pity for a father who did, and strove to do, so much for his children, who would have so valued their affection, yet who must have been constantly feeling that fear of him was drying it up at its source. This was no longer the case later in life, and with his younger children. They loved him tenderly: and if I cannot say so much of myself, I was always loyally devoted to him.<sup>13</sup>

James Mill stunted himself, and as a result stunted John Stuart Mill in his turn.

What these aesthetic and sympathetic capacities share is that they're *sensitivities* or *perceptual capacities*: they are capacities to be affected by features of the world, which can be more or less discriminating, penetrating, and resistant to distortion; which can more or less accurately and minutely engage with the world; which can be developed by practice, and starved by disuse. Mill calls them 'pleasurable susceptibilities'<sup>14</sup>. It's significant that Mill presents his crisis itself not (merely) as an upwelling of unhappy feeling, but rather as a crisis of sensitivity. He records it as a double shift in perception: on one hand, a failure to be moved or affected—a *dulling* or *suspension* or *wearing away* of the feelings. On the other hand, an inchoate sharpening of perception which reveals his then-current pursuits as unsatisfactory: the crisis is precipitated by an irrepressible *self-consciousness*—a form of self-observation—which reveals that attaining his goals wouldn't make his life meaningful. His gradual recovery is both the recovery and sharpening of the

capacities to be emotionally and aesthetically affected, and the discovery of appropriate *objects* on which to practice those capacities.

The most obvious of these objects is poetry: Wordsworth broke through Mill's despair by addressing 'one of the strongest of my pleasurable susceptibilities, the love of rural objects and natural scenery' and expressing 'states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty'<sup>15</sup>. But perhaps the most important of these ways of practicing appropriate feeling was Harriet Taylor: 'an extremely emotional person who [was] very skilled at circumnavigating John's intellectual defenses'<sup>16</sup>. The general, not merely personal lesson Mill draws is that 'the cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed'<sup>17</sup>. My suggestion is that Mill's account of these failures and cultivations of perceptual capacities is an account of (at least some of) those central human capacities, the possession and use of which constitute flourishing. Successful development of these aesthetic and emotional perceptual capacities—the cultivation of the feelings—is necessary to successful human life. We need to be able to have, and to appreciate, love and poetry; to have and appreciate love and poetry, we need to develop emotional and aesthetic *sensibilities*.

I have so far used the notion of sensibility casually; it needs some explanation, which I'll now offer via some analogies with other elements of human experience. I intend what follows not as a definition, but as a reminder: a way of calling to the reader's attention what I expect already to be familiar.

A sensibility, first, is close to a perceptual capacity. Like such capacities—sight, hearing, etc.—an aesthetic, emotional, or other sensibility is a way of coming to know the world from outside in, and not wholly voluntary: I would prefer not to hear the awfulness of an advertising jingle, but it imposes itself on my attention, just as thunder might. This is the analogy I have exploited above, and will continue to use below. But sensibilities are not exactly like perceptual capacities, in that they do not rely on 'dedicated input systems'<sup>18</sup>. Humans typically have sound-specific sensory pathways, but not beauty-specific or anger-specific ones. In this, sensibilities are more like emotions than like senses. Anger, for instance, is a not-wholly-voluntary response to the world which involves no *dedicated* input, but is rather a *way of taking* sensory and other inputs. Being angry, I take certain elements of the experienced world—a tone of voice, a remembered event, a character—as valenced, that is as having value<sup>19</sup>. Listening to an advertising jingle, I experience and judge it as bad: I hear it *as ugly and irritating*, not just as

a series of tones. Listening to ‘Flamenco Sketches’<sup>20</sup>, I hear it *as beautiful*. But, finally, sensibilities are unlike emotions in being trainable by practice: in this, they are more like skills. A skill is improved by repeatedly engaging in the skilled activity, typically motivated by pleasure in doing so; similarly, sensibilities are sharpened by pleasurable use (although, as Aristotle points out, practice can degrade as well as cultivate if it goes badly). ‘Flamenco Sketches’ can be heard, initially, as just a pleasant noise—an appealing aural surface. That pleasure motivates repeated listening, closer attention, and engagement with what’s related to its object (other music by Miles Davis and by John Coltrane, Bill Evans, Cannonball Adderley et al.; further jazz and modal music; criticism, biography, history). Repeated listening and further engagement deepens the perception and understanding of the music: it takes the listener under the surface into the structure of the piece, and reveals the workings of Davis and his band-members’ performance. The developed musical sensibility reveals the detail of the piece’s beauty: the specific ways in which it is good.

Sensibilities, then, are closely allied to several other features of our psychology and physiology: they are like perceptual capacities in being not-wholly-voluntary ways of coming to know the world; like emotions in being ways of taking the world as valenced; and like skills in being trainable by practice. In a phrase, we could say that sensibilities are skilled passions. The development of aesthetic and emotional sensibilities understood in this way is, on my reading of Mill, central to the successful human life, but I now need to deal with an objection to that reading.

#### IV. An Objection

At this point, the reader may want to object that this doesn’t show that Mill is a perfectionist. Even accepting that *Autobiography* reveals Mill’s account of the good life, the account it reveals is hedonistic: the good life involves a mutually-reinforcing relation between desire and pleasure, with pleasure as the value-giving element. On this alternative interpretation of his crisis, Mill begins with one set of desires, to be a reformer of the world as his father and Bentham intended; he gets pleasure from satisfying them; and he therefore continues to pursue those goals. But then—for whatever reason—the connection breaks. He can no longer get pleasure from his activism, and so activism becomes worthless to him: he has nothing left to live for. Luckily, Mill eventually finds some other desires and pleasures—love and poetry—to sustain him. On this reading, it doesn’t matter what our desires are desires *for*, so long as we have some, and take

pleasure in their satisfaction. The good life is the life where we want things, get them, and are thereby made happy. If the things we want are love and poetry, that's fine; but they could just as meaningfully have been Mill's pre-crisis political goals; or fame and fortune; or cosy obscurity; or stamp-collecting. What matters is wanting and the sensation of getting, not *what* we want and get pleasure from. Or, if this seems not to respect the developmental nature of Mill's account, we can agree that what we get pleasure from is not random, but perhaps follows some developmental trajectory from childish to adult tastes: as Mill got older, political activism lost its relish and the homely comforts of reading and affection started to seem more attractive, just as part of growing up is losing one's sweet tooth and acquiring a taste for olives. But that doesn't tell us what's good: it tells us about the changing *causes* of good, while good itself can still be understood as pleasure, consequent on the satisfaction of desire, where desires are matters of mere taste, whether purely idiosyncratic or grounded in developmental facts about humans.

In response, I suggest that this hedonistic reading doesn't catch Mill's own experience of his crisis. Mill did not understand what had happened to him as just a move from one arbitrary set of desires to another. It was a liberation and a self-revelation: liberation from his father's control and from the education which had shaped him; revelation of deep-rooted needs which had been starved by that education. On my reading of the crisis, Mill begins with an artificial, alien set of desires which can't sustain him. His irrepressible self-consciousness is a moment of self-perception which reveals not only the inadequacy of his current goals, but the seeds of better ones. Mill's pursuit of love and poetry—of emotional and aesthetic sensibility—is a matter of vital self-expression. Although it's possible to describe what happens to Mill in hedonistic terms, those terms leave Mill's supposed account of the good life unengaged with what he himself regarded as a central discovery about how life should be lived. I now show how that discovery informs the rest of Mill's ethics.

## V. Mill's Ethics Through the Autobiographical Lens

Taking stock: I've argued for reading Mill's *Autobiography* as a key to his value theory. This reading offers us a Millian perfectionism focused on flourishing, understood as the development of particular capacities. The idea that Mill's account of the good life involves the exercise of capacities, not just pleasant mental states, is not new: according to David Brink, for instance, Mill holds 'a conception of human happiness whose

dominant component consists in the exercise of one's rational capacities<sup>21</sup>. Wendy Donner and Don Habibi have both made related suggestions<sup>22</sup>. What I think is original here is my focus on the *development* (not just the exercise) of *perceptual* (not, or not only, rational) capacities.

Seeing Mill's ethics in this way has a number of interpretative benefits. For one example, it allows us to take Mill's insistence that individuality is a part of well-being at face value. Individuality, as Mill uses the concept, is the self-expressive use of developed capacities of choice and discrimination, in pursuit of what really suits us as individuals—it's what we use and discover in undertaking experiments in living. In *On Liberty* chapter III, Mill is explicit that it is a central part of what makes a life go well, not just a means by which an independently-defined good life can be secured<sup>23</sup>.

I want to focus on a different set of interpretative benefits, by returning to the issue with which I began: Mill's dispute with Bentham and the idea of competent judges. According to the obvious but mistaken answer to my first question—what is Mill's account of the good life?—Mill is a hedonist who adds quality to Bentham's list of good-makers for pleasure. According to my alternative answer, Mill is a perfectionist. What does this mean for his account of happiness in chapter II of *Utilitarianism*? I'll break that question down into four sub-questions.

First, *Who or what are competent judges?* Mill explicitly says that they're people with experience of both of two pleasures—say, poetry and pushpin—to be distinguished and ranked. I suggest that competent judges are people who have discriminating sensibilities, cultivated by practice on appropriate objects, who can therefore feel pleasures deeply and accurately. Their authority is therefore evidential, not constitutive, of the value of higher pleasures<sup>24</sup>. Competent judges *see* poetry as better than pushpin, much as the oil painter sees the difference between zinc white and flake white, where the layperson doesn't. They have skilled rather than unskilled passions in particular domains, and they therefore know the valenced world better. Their experience is practice—a fallible way of developing sensibility—not criterial for correct perception. This explains Mill's answer to an obvious objection: as a matter of fact, people with experience of higher and lower pleasures often choose the lower. 'Many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness<sup>25</sup>. Mill responds that the 'capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance<sup>26</sup>. People whose experience should lead them to be competent judges, but who choose lower over

higher pleasures, have had their sensibilities dulled by abuse, or starved by lack of proper objects at crucial stages of development. They haven't developed properly, or they've been corrupted.

So, second, *What's wrong with Bentham's account of the good life?* The same as was wrong with him as a human being: 'It is indispensable to a correct estimate of any of Bentham's dealings with the world, to bear in mind that in everything except abstract speculation he was to the last ... essentially a boy'<sup>27</sup>. Bentham never achieved adult development in his aesthetic and emotional faculties. He was therefore 'one-eyed'<sup>28</sup>: unable to see what competent judges see; unable to understand poetry or distinguish it from pushpin. Bentham loathed talk of 'good and bad taste'—because he had no taste.

Third, what is it that good taste chooses? *What is quality in pleasure?* On the standard reading, quality is a dimension of feeling-tone in a mental state (perhaps pleasures are higher or lower as sounds are warm or cold). On my reading, quality is whatever features of the world engage the developed sensibility of the competent judge, and especially, whatever features not only engage but further develop that sensibility. Poetry opens new vistas of pleasure in a way that pushpin doesn't: there's certainly pleasure to be had in playing a game well, not least the pleasure of absorption in skilled activity for its own sake<sup>29</sup>; but it compares unfavourably to the deepening pleasure involved, for instance, in getting to know 'Flemenco Sketches' well; or in starting with a vague fondness for that poem about a medieval tomb, reading it alongside the rest of Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings*, moving on to his *Highb Windows*, and then to his earlier poetry, influences, contemporaries, followers, and critics<sup>30</sup>.

Finally, *What is pleasure?* For Bentham, pleasure is a simple, familiar mental state, typically and contingently caused by the external factors categorized in *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* chapter III, but which could in theory be caused by non-standard factors like experience machines. For Mill—I suggest—pleasure is the engagement of skilled passion with the world. What's important is the exercise of a developed sensibility in *taking* pleasure in things with real qualities which can engage and sharpen that sensibility, not (or not only) the mental states which taking pleasure involves. This last thought is made clearer by an analogy with Peter Goldie's account of emotion<sup>31</sup>. Goldie makes a distinction between an *episode of emotional experience*—the stab of intense feeling when *she* giggles at something *he's* just whispered to her—and an *emotion*—jealousy, which is complex, episodic, structured over time, and which involves many different mental states, dispositions to act, and activities. Jealousy involves, but is a

lot more than, a stab of jealous feeling. Similarly, I want to distinguish between *episodes of pleasurable experience*—the first sip of my pint—and *taking pleasure*—taking a good book to a beer garden and spending the afternoon reading and writing. Episodes of pleasurable experience are part of taking pleasure, but not all of it. Taking pleasure in this enriched sense both requires and helps further to cultivate the sensibilities which reveal the qualities of pleasure’s objects.

The idea running through all four of these answers is that the development and expression of aesthetic and emotional sensibility both is a part of human flourishing, and is the development of the senses of value which allow us to identify the elements of human flourishing—including themselves—as good. There are two classes of benefit in seeing Mill’s account of the good life, and its relation to pleasure, in this way: first, the interpretative benefits canvassed above, which explain some otherwise puzzling features of Mill’s texts (like his answer to the problem of experienced judges who choose lower pleasures) and offer answers to standard objections (like the experience machine). I now move to the second class of benefits, which are for our understanding of the good life, rather than our understanding of Mill.

## VI. Millian Perfectionism

I began with two questions—What is Mill’s account of the good life, and is it of any use to us?—and have so far concentrated on the first. I’ve reread Mill’s *Autobiography* as a perfectionist account of the good life, which uses Mill’s own life as a dramatic example and warning. I take Mill’s failures of development to be particularly significant: those failures are in the development of *sensibilities*: liabilities to be affected by the world, which can be more or less deep and precise, and which can be educated or corrupted by practice. This reading of Mill’s account of the good life is a key to understanding his ethics. My main example of that key in use is Mill’s notorious idea of higher pleasures and competent judges, whom I’ve revealed as flourishing human beings with the discriminating sensibilities which are necessary to respond to the subtle gradations of quality in the objects of pleasure, and the development and use of which partly constitute the good life. The point of this work wasn’t just historical: it was to reveal *Autobiography* as an important ethical resource—a clue to the nature of the good life in its human complexity. I now want to turn briefly to my second question, and ask what we should take away from Millian perfectionism.

As is presumably already obvious, I think that Mill is right to emphasize aesthetic and emotional sensibilities as parts of flourishing. The best, most choiceworthy life for those we care about, including ourselves, requires their development and expression. Love and poetry are good for us: if we fail to develop the capacities to appreciate them, or if those capacities are corrupted in us, our lives go badly. I haven't exactly *argued* for that conclusion, being unsure how such an argument would go, but I have attempted to display these elements of flourishing in a way which I hope resonates with my reader's experience. To see what this discovery offers to us, it's worth putting it into its wider contemporary context as part of the ethical theory of perfectionism.

Perfectionism is one answer to the fundamental moral and political question, *How should one live?*, and addresses that question with an account of the *nature* and the *significance* of the good. The good is human flourishing, that is the full development and successful performance of whatever ways of being and functioning are of central importance in human life: one's life goes best when she expresses human and individual potential to the full. The significance of the good, so understood, is that it is the primary and independent ethical concept, from which the right is derived. The perfectionist, like the utilitarian, is a consequentialist; but like the virtue theorist, she denies that the good consists solely in mental states or in the satisfaction of preferences. Human good is to be promoted, but there are things which are good for humans, regardless of whether we want or enjoy them. The perfectionist's account of the central human ways of being and functioning is grounded in an account of natural human development and its distortions, and this ground makes sense of the metaphors, which I've used throughout this paper, of growth, flourishing, corruption, and stuntedness. Two obvious questions follow for the perfectionist: first, *Which* are the ways of being and functioning, the development and use of which constitute flourishing? What does a flourishing human possess and do? Second, *How* are we to promote human flourishing? What are its conditions of cultivation?<sup>32</sup>

One example of an answer to the first question, with implications for the second, is Brad Hooker's offer of pleasure, desire-satisfaction (of at least some desires), friendship, knowledge, achievement, and autonomy as the elements of the good life<sup>33</sup>. James Griffin, for another example, suggests accomplishment, agency, understanding, enjoyment, and deep personal relations<sup>34</sup>. The work I have done here both adds to such lists, and suggests a promising method for justifying them. The method I have adopted is to reread Mill's *Autobiography* as an effort to see a life as a single developmental process involving successes and failures: that is, as a dramatisation both of Mill's self-

understanding and of his understanding of human life. The contrast here is with the method of thought-experiments adopted by many other moral philosophers. Daniel Haybron's recent *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, for one instance among many, often makes its points by describing fictional characters—Angela the diplomat, who must choose between a well-earned retirement and a demanding new job, amongst others<sup>35</sup>. Such fictions can be helpful in making distinctions and in eliciting or putting pressure on intuitions, but lack the empirical weight of actual lives put under the spotlight of their owners' self-attention. If the perfectionist is right that humans have a natural developmental path which is not wholly up to us, we need to discover, not to invent it; our intuitions about it may be mistaken; and our best resources for discovery and correction are actual human lives as lived and understood.

A method is best tested by its results, of course, so I'll finish by revisiting the two elements of flourishing which a rereading of Mill's *Autobiography* as ethics reveals to us. Our capacities for love and poetry, as I've called them, are forms of sensibility: complex capacities which reveal features of the world to us, and make us available to be transformatively affected by those features. Emotional sensibility is the capacity for deep engagement with another person—to see them clearly as loved and loving, to feel with them, and to be shaped and changed by them. Aesthetic sensibility is the capacity for deep engagement with aesthetic objects (poetry, music or painting, for instance)—to see them precisely and to be shaped and changed by them. Both sensibilities are like skills in being developed by practice, and their development and expression is part of the best kind of life—that is, part of the life which we would choose for those we care about, if it were up to us. To see this, we can imagine lives without these features—would we be satisfied if our children never made any deep friendships?—or, better, read about real failures of development in—for instance—Mill's *Autobiography*.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank audiences in Berkeley, Liverpool, and Lancaster, and the editors and referees of *Inquiry*, for kind attention and useful discussion.

<sup>2</sup> The second formulation draws on Stephen Darwall's suggestion that 'a person's good is constituted, not by what that person values, prefers, or wants (or should value) but by what one (perhaps she) should want *insofar as one cares about her*'—*Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton University Press 2002), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* ed. J. H. Burns & H. L. A. Hart (Oxford University Press 1970 [1781]): chapter IV. Bentham's full list of circumstances according to which the value of a lot of pleasure is to be measured is: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent.

<sup>4</sup> I am taking it that hedonism is both the most obvious, and a prima facie plausible reading of Mill's value theory. But there is an alternative reading, on which Mill is a eudaimonist: the good life is the happy life. In one sense—the sense in which the Aristotle of *Nicomachean Ethics* book I is a eudaimonist—this is right. Mill and Aristotle agree that whatever humans aim at for its own sake is the good, and Mill follows Aristotle in calling that goal 'happiness', merely to have a convenient name, the referent of which is still to be discovered (see for instance John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* vol. 10: *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (University of Toronto Press 1969 [1861]): 203-59, chapter 4). But this kind of eudaimonism leaves open the question I'm concerned with, which is precisely the question of the referent, hedonistic or not, of 'happiness' in this preliminary sense. On the other hand, we might suggest that Mill is eudaimonist in a stronger sense: the good life is the happy life, where my happiness consists in my satisfaction with my life as a whole (see L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, & Ethics* (Clarendon Press 1996) for a sophisticated development of this idea; Fred Feldman, 'Whole Life Satisfaction Conceptions of Happiness', *Theoria* 74(2008): 219-38 for criticism; and Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (Penguin 2005) for summaries of its results in social science). This account of the nature of happiness is in many ways appealing, but as an account of Mill's value theory it is a non-starter, for two reasons. First, Mill clearly distinguishes between the self-satisfied life and the good life, as for instance in his claim that 'no intelligent person would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, *even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the*

*dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs.* (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 211, my emphasis). Second, as I shall argue in the rest of this paper, Mill has an ideal of human success from which we and our satisfactions can be corrupted: the happy fool and the self-satisfied rascal are failing as human beings, and therefore not living the best kind of life.

<sup>5</sup> For example: Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism* (Oxford University Press 2004); Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford University Press 2006): chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> I am not the first person to take *Autobiography* as having philosophical as well as personal significance. See, for instance, Elizabeth Anderson, 'John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living', *Ethics* 102(1991): 4-26; Eldon J. Eisenach, 'Mill's *Autobiography* as Political Theory', *History of Political Thought* 8(1987): 11-29; Elijah Millgram, 'Mill's Incubus', draft, <http://www.philosophy.utah.edu/Faculty/millgram/wip.html> (accessed 3 July 2009). I am, so far as I can discover, the first to read it as perfectionist value theory.

<sup>7</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* vol. 1: *Autobiography and Literary Essays* ed. John M. Robson & Jack Stillinger (University of Toronto Press 1981 [1873]): 1-290, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137-9 (in this edition, the odd-numbered pages are the published version and the even-numbered pages are a parallel text of Mill's unpublished draft, so the quoted text is a continuous passage which skips p. 138).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Mill between Aristotle & Bentham' in *Daedalus* 133(2004): 60-68, <http://www.utilitarian.net/jsmill/about/20040322.htm> (accessed 27 January 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotions* (Oxford University Press 2004), p. 222.

---

<sup>19</sup> I draw here on Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Miles Davis, 'Flemenco Sketches' on *Kind of Blue* (Columbia 1959), track 5.

<sup>21</sup> David O. Brink, 'Mill's Deliberative Utilitarianism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21(1992): 67-103, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy* (Cornell University Press 1991); Don A. Habibi, *John Stuart Mill and the Ethic of Human Growth* (Kluwer Academic 2001).

<sup>23</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* vol. 18: *Essays on Politics and Society* Part 1 ed. John M. Robson (University of Toronto Press 1977 [1859]): 213-310.

<sup>24</sup> The distinction is Brink's in 'Mill's Deliberative Utilitarianism', p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 212.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>27</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'Bentham' in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* vol. 10: *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (University of Toronto Press 1969 [1838]): 75-115, note to p. 115.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimum Experience* (Harper Perennial 1991).

<sup>30</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* ed. Anthony Thwaite (The Marvell Press and faber & faber 2003). 'That poem about a medieval tomb' is, of course, 'An Arundel Tomb', pp. 116-17.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford University Press 2000).

<sup>32</sup> This paragraph summarises the first section of my 'Kicking Against the Pricks: Anarchist Perfectionism and the Conditions of Independence' in Benjamin Franks ed., *Anarchism & Moral Philosophy* (Palgrave Macmillan forthcoming), and therefore draws, as does that, on Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford University Press 1993).

<sup>33</sup> Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford University Press 2000), §2.3.

<sup>34</sup> James Griffin, *Value Judgement: Improving Our Ethical Beliefs* (Oxford University Press 1996), pp. 29-30.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel M. Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (Oxford University Press 2008): chapter 8.