

Was Mill a Noncognitivist?

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the presumption that Mill endorses a form of metaethical noncognitivism. I argue that the evidence traditionally cited for this interpretation is not convincing and suggest that we should instead remain open to a cognitivist reading. I begin by laying out the “received view” of Mill on the status of practical norms, as given by Alan Ryan in the 1970s. I then argue that there is no firm textual evidence for this reading of Mill: his remarks on “art” and “science” do not show the metaethical commitments they have been taken to. Neither is there firm *textual* evidence for a cognitivist reading. However, a noncognitivist interpretation suffers from the fault of anachronism and is difficult to reconcile with the clear commitment in *Utilitarianism* to the possibility of evidence being given for the desirability of pleasure. A cognitivist reading would not suffer from these faults, and on that basis, I conclude that we should think further about what a cognitivist reading of Mill might amount to.

Of all the areas of Mill’s moral philosophy, the least explored is the metaethical grounding of his utilitarianism. There are signs in the secondary literature that there is growing interest in this topic, however. Mill’s doctrine of the “Art of Life” and his distinction between art and science, as expounded in the *System of Logic*,¹ has recently been the subject of sustained attention.² It is generally acknowledged that this is where the theory of practical reason that grounds Mill’s moral philosophy is to be found, and that this is therefore where disputes about the nature of his utilitarianism will be resolved. Yet, despite this renewed interest in the foundations of Mill’s utilitarianism, little attention has been given to the *status* of normative claims delivered by practical reason. On this issue, there remains an accepted dogma of Mill interpretation – one that, I shall argue, is grounded in a questionable reading of the “Art of Life.” The dogma is that Mill endorsed a form of metaethical noncognitivism.³

I wish, in this paper, to question this dogma. I begin in section 1 by laying out the “received view” of Mill on the status of practical norms, as given by Alan Ryan in the 1970s. I will claim in

¹J. S. Mill, *System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* in J. M. Robson, ed., *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 vols., (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1963), VI.xii. References to Mill’s work will be taken from *The Collected Works* and cited as CW vol., page. Specific works will be additionally referenced as follows: *System* (section) = *System of Logic*, CW VII-VIII; *Utilitarianism* (chapter) = *Utilitarianism*, CW X; *Examination* (chapter) = *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, CW IX.

²See Ben Eggleston, Dale Miller, and David Weinstein, eds., *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Significant discussion of the “Art of Life” also occurs in Dale Miller, *J. S. Mill* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 79–83. The articles by D.G. Brown, Jonathan Riley, and Dale Miller that make up the special issue of *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 9 (2010) also each focus on the “Art of Life” and its application to morality. See D. G. Brown, “Mill’s Moral Theory: Ongoing Revisionism,” *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 9 (2010): 5–45; Dale Miller, “Brown on Mill’s Moral Theory: A Critical Response,” *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 9 (2010): 47–66; Jonathan Riley, “Mill’s Extraordinary Utilitarian Moral Theory,” *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 9 (2010): 67–116.

³The issue of how to characterize “noncognitivism” is itself open to debate. For the purposes of this discussion, I take the divide between cognitivism and noncognitivism simply to be one concerning truth-aptness. Noncognitivism is the thesis that moral statements are properly understood as being incapable of truth and falsity; cognitivism is the claim that moral statements are capable of truth or falsity. As will become clear in section 3.2, I do not hold that this view of cognitivism commits one to any substantive account of *what* makes the statements in question true or false.

sections 2 and 3 that there is no firm textual evidence for this reading of Mill as a noncognitivist. What is more, I suggest in section 4 that such an interpretation – in any case anachronistic – is difficult to reconcile with the argument for the desirability of pleasure in *Utilitarianism* section IV.3. This must be the starting point for any reconstruction of Mill’s metaethics.

1 The noncognitivist interpretation

Alan Ryan’s interpretation of Mill in *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* – the first interpretation that gives any attention to Mill’s metaethics and sets the agenda for what subsequent thinking about the topic there has been – must be read with an eye kept on its contextual goals. Ryan’s 1970s work on Mill, he admits, is “in part a work of propaganda.”⁴ This body of work addresses the much repeated claim that Mill commits the naturalistic fallacy. Accused by Moore of attempting to identify a normative concept with a naturalistic property, Mill is said, in his “proof” of the utility principle, to attempt the impossible, and bridge the fact-norm gap by identifying the desired and desirable.⁵ Largely due to Ryan, this accusation is no longer taken seriously, and for this his propagandist work is to be applauded. Yet, we must keep in mind the argument by which Ryan overturned the Moorean criticism of Mill.

Ryan aims to show that Mill could not have attempted to *prove* the utility principle by identifying desired and desirable, and he does so by following up Mill’s remark that “questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof.”⁶ Ryan “relate[s] *Utilitarianism* to the *System of Logic* and to the last of the *Essays of Some Unsettled Questions on Political Economy*, out of which one can reconstruct the argument which leads him to say that proof is impossible.”⁷ These are the passages, which focus on the distinction between art and science, that we will consider in section 2. Ryan claims that Mill holds that “the reason why evaluative judgments are not capable of proof is that they are not factual statements; indeed they are not really statements at all.”⁸ Ryan’s position is that Mill could not have meant to prove the utility principle, because he does not believe that the utility principle is truth-amenable. As he writes in the 1974 *J. S. Mill*, “‘proved’ is a shorthand for ‘proved true’, and whatever cannot be true can hardly be proved true.”⁹

The vindication of Mill’s statement that there can be no proof of ultimate ends rests in the fact that a proposition like “Happiness is the supreme good” is not, as its grammatical form suggests, a statement at all, but an imperative – “Seek happiness” – and is not susceptible of either truth or falsity.¹⁰

Ryan sees this noncognitivist reading beyond a mere analysis of the “proof,” however, interpolating an entire metaethical foundation for Mill. He remarks upon “how closely Mill’s account resembles that given by ‘prescriptivists’ such as Hare,”¹¹ and offers a universalist parsing of “stealing is wrong” as “let no-one steal” on behalf of Mill.¹²

Ryan’s analysis of Mill has become the standard – though it often seems *tacit* – interpretation in the secondary literature. There have, to my knowledge, been no challenges to his reading, and discussions of the status of moral discourse in Mill’s work have followed his. Henry West, for instance, in a recent work, reads Mill as a noncognitivist, writing:

⁴Alan Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, 2nd ed. (Hampshire, UK: MacMillan Press, 1987), ix.

⁵G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 63–67.

⁶J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* ch. 1, CW X, 207. Also cited in Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, 188.

⁷Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, 189.

⁸Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, 189.

⁹Alan Ryan, *J. S. Mill* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1974), 102.

¹⁰Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, 190.

¹¹Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, 189.

¹²Ryan, *J. S. Mill*, 103.

It is wrong to kill, to steal, to deceive, to coerce ... Aren't these moral truths? According to Mill's analysis of moral language, these are disguised as statements of fact, but are more like imperatives: thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal, etc. They are precepts or rules, rather than statements of fact ... Mill's theory contrasts with what is today called 'moral realism'.¹³

Again, appealing to the distinction between arts and sciences, West suggests that Mill "could be interpreted as an antirealist with regard to *moral* judgments."¹⁴ Richard Fumerton, in another recent work, compares Mill's metaethical theory to the purported noncognitivism of Hume and asks if "one might wonder whether Mill is at least toying with a view very much like twentieth century prescriptivism."¹⁵ Once more, the evidence cited comes from the passages on art and science that we shall consider below.

In the background of these readings, however, seems to be a nagging suspicion that there is something amiss. Ryan notes that "Mill does not produce any argument in support of this analysis," and the lack of a clear statement of the noncognitivist position is clearly of concern.¹⁶ West is ambivalent about attributing noncognitivism to *all* value claims.¹⁷ Fumerton, too, remains somewhat detached from his reading. "Of course," he writes, "all these [i.e. Fumerton's] speculations are based on very little textual evidence."¹⁸ As we shall see, their reticence is well justified.

2 Mill on the distinction between art and science

In this section, I wish to present Mill's distinction between art and science, before proceeding in section 3 to consider whether that evidence does warrant the interpretation Ryan offers. The distinction between art and science is one that Mill makes in only four places: an early essay on political economy entitled *On the Definition of Political Economy* (1831), the *System* and a related letter (both 1843), and the *Examination* (1865). Though it remains underarticulated, the spacing and (relative) uniformity of his writings on the subject indicate a considered view.

In 1831, Mill notes that the

ideas of *science* and *art* ... differ from one another as the understanding differs from the will, or as the indicative mood in grammar differs from the imperative. The one deals in facts, the other in precepts. Science is a collection of *truths*; Art, a body of *rules*, or directions for conduct. The language of science is, This is, or, This is not; This does, or does not, happen. The language of art is, Do this; Avoid that. Science takes cognisance of a *phenomenon*, and endeavours to discover its *law*; art proposes to itself an *end*, and looks out for *means* to effect it.¹⁹

This distinction is made in order to better assess the status of political economy. Mill adds, however, that "morality itself is not a science, but an art; not truths, but rules."²⁰

¹³Henry West, *Mill's Utilitarianism* (London: Continuum, 2007), 31.

¹⁴West, *Mill's Utilitarianism*, 32. It seems clear in context that West uses "antirealism" as at least encompassing, if not being coextensive with, what we have been referring to as noncognitivism.

¹⁵Wendy Donner and Richard Fumerton, *Mill* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 193.

¹⁶Ryan, *J. S. Mill*, 103.

¹⁷West asks "what about 'Happiness is desirable and the only thing desirable as an end'? When we read chapter 4 [of *Utilitarianism*], Mill appeals to psychology. There he seems to be more like a scientist than an artist." (West *Mill's Utilitarianism*, 31–32). This implies that West thinks Mill regards *foundational* norms as truth-apt.

¹⁸Donner and Fumerton, *Mill*, 193.

¹⁹Mill, *On the Definition of Political Economy*, CW IV, 312.

²⁰Mill, *On the Definition of Political Economy*, CW IV, 319–20.

Though art and science are separated in this way, Mill notes that we are nevertheless called upon to use scientific results in actualizing the goals of art: “art proposes itself an *end*, and looks out for *means* to effect it.”²¹ Art without a corresponding science would be unable to realise its imperatives, indeed to the extent that Mill claims “an art would not be an art, unless it were founded upon a scientific knowledge of the properties of the subject-matter.”²²

The most detailed discussion of the divide takes place in Book VI of the *System* of 1843.²³ Here, Mill is addressing the moral directly: “The imperative mood is the characteristic of art, as distinguished from science. Whatever speaks in rules, or precepts, not in assertions respecting matters of fact, is art.”²⁴ Mill notes that “practical ethics or morality” is often considered part of moral science, but considers this an improper use of the term, as its results “do not express themselves in the indicative, but in the imperative mood.”²⁵ “Morality [is] not a Science, but an Art.”²⁶

In the *System*, Mill notes that we are called upon to use science in attaining the ends of art, but that this does not alter their strict delineation.

The relation in which rules of art stand to doctrines of science may be thus characterized. 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.²⁷

But though the reasonings which connect the end or purpose of every art with its means, belong to the domain of Science, the definition of the end itself belongs exclusively to Art and forms its peculiar province. 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 ... These are not propositions of science. Propositions of science assert a matter of fact: an existence, a coexistence, a succession, or a resemblance. The propositions now spoken of do not assert that anything is, but enjoin or recommend that something should be. They are a class by themselves. A proposition of which the predicate is expressed by the words *ought* or *should be*, is generically different from one which is expressed by *is*, or *will be*.²⁸

When Mill returns to the distinction between art and science in the *Examination* of 1865, little has changed. Science is said to be that which “determines what is”; art, “what should be.”²⁹ Mill, again, emphasises that art and science must be combined in order to be useful.

The Science of Politics treats of the laws of political phaenomena; it is the science of human nature under social conditions. The Art of Politics consists (or would

²¹Mill, *On the Definition of Political Economy*, CW IV, 312.

²²Mill, *On the Definition of Political Economy*, CW IV, 312.

²³Book VI of the *System* was last to be composed, and it would seem likely that, though the writing of the work as a whole extends back into the early 1830s, this portion was written in the late 1830s and early 1840s. See J. Robson’s “Textual Introduction” to the *System* CW VII, lv–lxv.

²⁴Mill, *System*, VI.xii.1, CW VIII, 943.

²⁵Mill, *System*, VI.xii.1, CW VIII, 943.

²⁶Mill, *System*, VI.xii.1 (title), CW VIII, 943.

²⁷Mill, *System*, VI.xii.2, CW VIII, 944.

²⁸Mill, *System*, VI.xii.6, CW VIII, 949. It should be noted that this quotation is from the final 1851 edition of the *System*.

²⁹Mill, *Examination*, ch. 20, CW IX, 248.

consist if it existed) of rules, founded on the science, for the right guidance and government of the affairs of society.³⁰

Politics, ethics and logic are all said, in their broad sense, to be a combination of art and science: to be driven by an artistic imperative in combination with scientific facts about how to attain the prescribed end. Yet, Mill still makes it clear that we must not confound the two domains. “An entirely different classification is required for the purposes of theoretical knowledge, and for those of its practical application.”³¹

3 Interpreting Mill’s Distinction

This is the extent of Mill’s discussion of the status of moral discourse and the distinction between art and science and the textual evidence on which we must find a position for Mill in the cognitive/noncognitive debate. Though Mill’s view between 1831 and 1865 remains remarkably stable, it should be noted how little we are told of substance. Mill’s view on the nature of moral statements remains, on the basis of the text, fairly hollow: we are told that morality is an art, rather than a science, but once padding is removed from Mill’s writing on the distinction, we are left with relatively little. The various ways in which Mill distinguishes art from science can be set out as in the table below.

<i>Science</i>	<i>Art</i>	<i>Year</i>
pertains to truths/facts/phenomena	pertains to rules	1831, 1843, 1846
indicative in mood	imperative in mood	1831, 1843
determines what is	prescribes what should be	1843, 1865
analogous to understanding	analogous to will	1831
expressed in ‘is/will be’	expressed in ‘ought/should be’	1843
[no obvious counterpart given]	enjoin or recommend	1843
inquiries into the course of nature	[no obvious counterpart given]	1843

3.1 Defining Art on Its Own Terms

Each of these formulations of the distinction between science and art is subtly different. We could reasonably take away something different from each characterization of art: being enjoined or recommended is not the same as being prescribed; rules do not stand to facts as the will stands to understanding in anything but a very loose sense. We make the various accounts of the defining features of art coextensive only with much effort and interpolation, and they certainly cannot be read as being equivalences of one another.

Indeed, when examining the actual content of the claims that Mill makes about the nature of the arts, we are left with a relatively small amount to go on. The *positive* side of what Mill says about the nature of the arts is scant. We are told in all three texts that art pertains to rules. Yet, that ethics is a rule-bound practice is hardly a revelation, and that Mill notes this cannot be taken to disclose a great deal of interest about his thinking on metaethics. Similarly with Mill’s comment that the arts are expressed in terms of “ought/should be”: this much we can all agree on. Noting that ethical statements are expressed in this way gives us no clue as to their status as truth-apt.

Mill’s claim that the arts are imperative in mood seems more interesting. In itself, however, his mention of imperatives tells us little. It is exactly the status and nature of imperatives that are

³⁰Mill, *Examination*, ch. 20, CW IX, 350–51.

³¹Mill, *Examination*, ch. 20, CW IX, 351.

at stake in the discussion of metaethics. In itself, noting that Kant believes in the existence of the Categorical Imperative indicates nothing of whether we should regard his ethics as cognitive, noncognitive, realist, or constructivist.³² Only the spelling out of such a view can provide a direct insight into the particulars of a metaethical position. Yet, when we look for this in Mill's discussion of the relevance of the imperatival mood, we are disappointed. Mill claims at one point that arts "enjoin or recommend"³³ and at another point that an art "prescribes what should be."³⁴ Being such small clues, and being divergent, this is of limited help: we are still left wanting to know whether the resultant norms are truth-apt. Though the claim that science is to understanding as art is to will is interesting and seems to offer rich resources, it is never explored, and remains a vague analogy that can only be reliably taken as a *restatement* of the indicative/imperative distinction, rather than the *explication* of it that is wanted.

3.2 Defining Art in Relation to Science

Seemingly more informative are Mill's negative comments about art – where Mill contrasts art with science, seeming to disclose what art is *not*. Though this is clearly a weaker interpretative strategy than relying on Mill's direct claims about art, it might nevertheless be thought that these negative comments can bear enough weight to secure a substantive interpretation of Mill's metaethics. I doubt this to be so.

Consider Mill's claim that science "in the only proper sense of the term" refers to "inquiries into the course of nature."³⁵ By implication, art is not an inquiry into the course of nature. Even taking "nature" here to refer to the world *in toto*, this is of little help. If Mill's point is merely that ethical statements do not pertain to facts about the world, we might read him in one of two ways. To be sure, we *could* read him as a noncognitivist, claiming that the relevant alternatives to factive statements about the world are truth-inapt universalised commands or prescriptions. But an equally consistent reading would be to attribute to him the view that the alternative to factive statements about the world are truth-apt statements that are not about the way the world is. It is consistent with cognitivism, as a thesis about truth-aptitude, that moral statements are not made true not by corresponding to the way the world is, but in some other way. Truth in moral statements might, for Mill, be characterized in a way other than correspondence to the worldly facts: taken as a semantic thesis, cognitivism need not be tethered to substantive commitments about the metaphysics of value. All we properly gather from his definition, that is to say, is that noncognitivism and *a cognitivism taking in truths that are not about the way the world is* are the only options open to Mill. It does not help us to arbitrate between the possible interpretations. And, as I hope is shown by the growing consensus that a belief in truths about a nonworldly normative domain is consistent with naturalism, it is not obvious that such an interpretation would be in philosophic tension with Mill's naturalistic ontology.³⁶

³²Korsgaard makes this point neatly with regard to Kant. Kant clearly thought that it was *true* that one ought not to act according to a nonuniversalisable maxim, and yet this is imperatival. Kantian Constructivism "can seem to fall between the cracks" of cognitivism and noncognitivism; theories such as this "don't fit" in either camp easily, but a reading can be forced in both ways. See Christine Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism in Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, APA Centennial Supplement (2003): 99–122, esp. 105–6.

³³Mill, *System*, VI.xii.6, CW VIII, 949.

³⁴Mill, *Examination*, ch. 20, CW IX, 348.

³⁵Mill, *System*, VI.xii.2, CW XII, 943.

³⁶See Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 464–87, T. M. Scanlon, "Metaphysical Objections," in *Being Realistic about Reasons* (forthcoming), ch. 2, and John Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 420–41. Each view, of course, is subtly different, but all believe in irreducibly normative truths while claiming that these norms "exist" in a different sense than 'exists' is applied within the domain of physical objects, and each takes his position to be compatible with a naturalistic ontology. While Parfit characterizes his position as "nonnaturalist," his nonnaturalism is not a *metaphysical* view. He quotes Nagel approvingly: "such normative claims 'need not (and in my view should not) have any metaphysical content whatever.'" (Parfit, *On*

The same point can be made in relation to Mill's definition of science as pertaining to facts or phenomena. Insofar as he takes science to focus on *phenomena* – and when Mill takes his considered phenomenal-idealist position seriously, this does seem to be the case – nonscience is not determined as either a noncognitive or cognitive position exclusively. Perfectly intelligible truth-apt claims can be made that pertain to some nonphenomenal domain. Alternatively, if we take him to be making the claim that science pertains to “the factual,” we have little indication of how far “the factual” should here extend. Again, we can take “factual” to mean truths about the way the world is, and thereby leave room for the cognitivist position that ethical statements belong to some nonfactual, but still truth-apt, domain; or we can, taking a noncognitivist interpretation, take “factual” to mean all truth-apt statements. If Mill means by “fact” a truth about the world, his denial that arts pertain to facts does not help us choose between noncognitivism and a cognitivist position that extends truth beyond the worldly: he can merely hold that moral truths are made true in some other way.

Of course, it will be noted that I have treated only the latter two component parts of his truths/facts/phenomena definition. The attribution of “truth” to science (and by implication, a denial of its place within art) might be thought to put us in safer interpretative territory. Similarly, Mill's claim that “Science is a collection of truths”³⁷ and by implication that art is something else, is, one might think, a straightforward statement of noncognitivism, ruling out any cognitivist position. Yet, I would suggest, we should be wary of resting too much on this apparently clear statement of his position. The reason I think caution should be maintained is that this remains only an *indirect* implication, and the places in which truth, as distinct from fact or phenomena, is discussed are very few in number: in the passages we have been considering, they do not clearly outweigh the alternative body of text that apparently commits Mill to regarding the content of art as truth-apt.

Consider, for example, Mill's claim that “it is true, that in the largest sense of the words, even these propositions [of art] assert something as a matter of fact.”³⁸ Mill's comment that statements in the arts can be true in a broad sense is clearly relevant to the discussion of the status of norms, and should shake any noncognitivist reading predicated on Mill's few apparent implications that art does not pertain to truth. We must add into this confusion that Mill, in the passages we have been considering, talks of the arts being subjects of “knowledge” and is comfortable referring to statements of art as “propositions,” as “premises,” and as capable of being used to “assert.”³⁹ While it would be unfair to expect Mill to employ these terms in the rigorous manner that has come to be the norm in professional philosophy today, the breadth and repetition of implications that principles of art are truth-evaluable cannot be entirely ignored and should be enough to make us wary of committing to one interpretation rather than another.

What Matters, vol. 2, 486.) Compare also Dworkin's recent claim that “if we want a genuine moral ontology or epistemology, we must construct it from within morality,” and that the break from metaphysics must be a “clean one” involving “conceptions of truth and falsity” from “within the realms of value itself”. (Ronald Dworkin, *Justice For Hedgehogs* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011], 418, 38.) Here, however, the claim is said to rupture the very divide between ethical and metaethical reflection.

³⁷ Mill, *On the Definition of Political Economy*, CW IV, 312.

³⁸ Mill, *System*, VI.xii.6, CW VIII, 949. Mill goes on in this passage to note that “the fact affirmed in them is, that the conduct recommended excites in the speaker's mind the feeling of approbation,” but that this “does not go to the bottom of the matter.” I take it that this is a denial that the psychological manifestation of the norm exhausts its status as a norm: that there is more to be said about the normative than is said merely by an account of our feelings of approbation. Mill is not, that is to say, a *reductive* naturalist about the normative. This, of course, leaves open the question of the truth aptitude.

³⁹ Mill, *System*, VI.xii.1, CW VIII, 943, 949.

3.3 Drawing Conclusions from the Arts/Science Distinction

Two further observations should warn us against committing to either a noncognitivist or cognitivist reading of Mill on the basis of textual evidence alone. The first is that Mill simply did not see his comments as philosophically innovative. We know this from the rather loose and casual way in which he conducts the discussions cited in this section. There is a lack of rigor in Mill's comments relating to the arts and sciences, which in the context of the lengthy and carefully articulated *System* and *Examination*, at least, indicate that Mill was not attempting to "make a statement." We know this also because Mill explicitly says so in correspondence relating to the *System*. In a letter of 1843 to Edward Lytton Bulwer, he writes:

I am afraid the proposition that Morality is an Art, not a Science, will hardly be found on closer examination to have so much in it as you seem to have thought was intended. It follows as a necessary corollary from my particular mode of using the word Art, but at bottom I fancy it is merely what everybody thinks, expressed in new language.⁴⁰

With his distinction, Mill thought of himself as articulating the ordinary view of morality. His purpose in setting out the distinction between art and science was not to take a metaethical stance on the status of discourse about ends, but, rather, to defend the common view that once ends have been isolated, we must reason about them as goals to be attained, rather than as propositions to be logically explicated. This latter view, Mill associated with thinkers who would start with a premise about human nature and run wild with attempted derivations. This "deductive" approach, Mill thought, was "the habitual error of many of the political speculators whom I have characterised as the geometrical school; especially in France."⁴¹

Mill, in his discussions of art and science, merely meant to draw attention to the fact that practical reasoning must proceed in the opposite direction from theoretical reasoning. Mill's point is simply that arts are teleologically orientated and therefore have a different structure from sciences. We must, he wants to show, think about arts in a different way from sciences. So, when Mill gives details of the motivations for drawing a distinction between art and science, they are not motivations for a noncognitivist position. Issues of queerness, motivational deficiency, and epistemic contact with the moral never arise.

The reason why systems of precepts require to be distinguished from systems of truths, is, that an entirely different classification is required for the purposes of theoretical knowledge, and for those of its practical application. Take the art of navigation, for example: where is the single science corresponding to this art ... ? Navigation is an art dependent on nearly the whole circle of the physical sciences ... many single rules could only have been framed by the union of considerations drawn from several different sciences.⁴²

The thought is this: we must organize our thinking not in terms of reasoning away from principles toward new conclusions, but in terms of reasoning our way toward the attainment of goals. Because we are not inferring from premises, the resultant body of knowledge in art does not, as in science, appear as a neat package. An art has unity not in virtue of its foundations, but of its aim: we draw together apparently seemingly unrelated knowledge to allow us to attain a goal.

⁴⁰Mill, Letter to Edward Lytton Bulwer (393) 27 March 1843, CW XIII, 579.

⁴¹Mill, *System*, VI.xii.4, CW VIII, 946.

⁴²Mill, *Examination*, ch. 20, CW IX, 351.

Art in general, consists of the truths of Science, arranged in the most convenient order for practice, instead of the order which is most convenient for thought. Science groups and arranges its truths, so as to enable us to take in at one view as much as possible of the general order of the universe. Art ... brings together from parts of the field of science most remote from one another, the truths relating to the production of the different and heterogeneous conditions necessary to each effect which the exigencies of practical life require to be produced.⁴³

Science takes cognisance of a *phenomenon*, and endeavours to discover its *law*; art proposes to itself an *end*, and looks out for *means* to effect it.⁴⁴

For the reasons outlined in this section, I do not believe there is a safe reading of Mill's metaethics on the basis of textual evidence. There can be no doubt that Mill regards morality as an art, but this in itself tells us little about the truth-aptitude of its claims. Mill does not attempt to set out a metaethic in his passages on art and science, and the claims he makes that might be taken as clues to his metaethical stance are not reliable enough to warrant any single reading.

4 Against the noncognitivist interpretation

Though Mill is not clearly committed to either noncognitivism or cognitivism on the basis of *textual* evidence, of course, we may find other reasons to endorse a cognitivist or noncognitivist reading. But, I wish to argue, whereas the textual evidence does not *support* a noncognitivist reading, rather leaving the question open, there are other reasons that positively count *against* a noncognitivist reading.

4.1 The Problem of Anachronism

We should note, first of all, that any ascription of noncognitivism to Mill suffers from the primary fault of being anachronistic. It has recently been argued by Daniel Jacobson that an attribution of consequentialism to Mill is historically dubious. The thrust of his argument – that Mill is read “too much through the lens of twentieth-century developments in ethical theory” – can be extended to the noncognitivist *metaethical* reading of the 1970s.⁴⁵ Ryan's aim of encouraging a sympathetic reading of Mill's work, in response to the uncharitable and implausible readings that were then prevalent, was an important one, and one that necessitated portraying Mill as a relevant philosopher who spoke to modern interests. This aim, however, has now been achieved: the task at hand must be to find a reading that is also historically viable, and it is not historically viable to attribute Mill noncognitivism.

If we were to read Mill as a noncognitivist, we would be reading back the concerns of mid-to-late twentieth-century philosophy into Mill's work. The term was first used in 1951 by William Frankena, to bring together the emotivism of A. J. Ayer and universal prescriptivism of R. M. Hare.⁴⁶ The position takes its form in relation to the logical positivism of the preceding decades, and related concerns within the philosophy of language that emerged in the intervening period. These concerns were not Mill's own, however, and he cannot have been expected to anticipate concerns that have emerged so long after his writing.

⁴³Mill, *System*, VI.xii.5, CW VIII, 947.

⁴⁴Mill, *On the Definition of Political Economy*, CW IV, 312.

⁴⁵Daniel Jacobson, “Utilitarianism without Consequentialism: The Case of John Stuart Mill,” *Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 159–91, esp. 159.

⁴⁶William K. Frankena, “Moral Philosophy at Mid-Century,” *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), 44–55.

Of course, we ought not to be *too* precious about our historical terms. The argument that, because Mill's thinking predates the terminology, an ascription of noncognitivism is anachronistic will not be on its own persuasive if noncognitivism and cognitivism exhaust the metaethical landscape. Put simply: if it is a matter of logic that everyone must adopt either a cognitivist or a noncognitivist position, it counts for little that Mill could not have recognized the terms involved; an argument from anachronism will have diminished force where a thinker must have at least implicitly taken a stance on the issue in question. The distinction between noncognitivism and cognitivism, of course, *does* look exhaustive. And, indeed, I will suggest that it would be acceptable to read Mill as a cognitivist, despite him not having access to *this* term.

The argument, then, is not that there is some deep theoretical confusion involved in reading Mill as a noncognitivist because he could not have conceptualised this position. It is, rather, that it would be odd to read him in this way; that those advancing this interpretation face a particularly high burden of proof in establishing that he *did* conceptualize this position. We should think this because there is an asymmetry between cognitivism and noncognitivism. Cognitivism – the claim that moral statements can be true or false – is the “ordinary view.”⁴⁷ Noncognitivism is a departure from our everyday way of thinking. Whereas noncognitivism is a philosophic *solution* motivated by philosophic *problems*, cognitivism is not a solution, but our default position. It does not need to be motivated or even explicitly formulated in order to be endorsed.

Of course, Mill *could* have inverted the ordinary view of morality and formulated the noncognitivist position without the motivations of the twentieth century. The case would be easier to make, however, if it could be shown that there were problems and positions in currency during the period that Mill could have drawn on in developing something similar to a noncognitivist metaethic. But the onus must surely be on those who mount an argument for Mill's noncognitivism to make that case: to explicate the dialogue that prompted a departure from the ordinary view (and in which this new view could be described as “what everybody thinks”⁴⁸ and unworthy of serious defense.)

No such sustained argument has been given. However, Fumerton, as was noted above, hints at one. “Mill may have been a Humean on matters metaethical”, he writes.⁴⁹ This is certainly the right *sort* of argument to establish Mill's noncognitivism: appeal to a prior noncognitivist that Mill enters into a conversation with. But the suggestion seems implausible on two grounds. Firstly, although modern philosophers often cite Hume as a noncognitivist role model, there are significant reasons, historical and philosophical, to doubt the ascription of the position to Hume himself. Rachel Cohon has argued convincingly that a noncognitivist reading involves serious interpretative difficulties.⁵⁰ Secondly, even if it *could* be established that an attribution of noncognitivism to Hume is itself unproblematic, there is very little evidence that Mill was influenced by Hume's ethics in this regard. Hume's ethical thought was somewhat out of fashion during this period. Mill never cites the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and explicitly mentions the *Treatise* only once.⁵¹ His primary applause for Hume is given on the basis of his

⁴⁷I borrow this terminology from Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, 26–28. See also Skorupski, *Domain of Reasons*, 6, 401 on “common cognition” and the Critical stance.

⁴⁸Mill, Letter to Edward Lytton Bulwer (393) 27 March 1843, CW XIII, 579.

⁴⁹Donner and Fumerton, *Mill*, 192.

⁵⁰Rachel Cohon, *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11–160. See also Nicholas L. Sturgeon, “Hume's Metaethics: Is Hume a Moral Noncognitivist,” in Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, ed., *A Companion to Hume* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 513–28, and Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 178–204 for arguments in favor of the cognitivist interpretation. We might also note that Fumerton's claim that Mill could have taken *prescriptivism* from Hume is open to a further worry: even where Hume is read as a noncognitivist, he is generally attributed some version of sentimentalism, expressivism, or projectivism, rather than prescriptivism. See, e.g., Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 199–220, Antony Flew, “On the Interpretation of Hume,” *Philosophy* 38 (1963), 178–81, Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* Rev. Ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 74–80.

⁵¹Mill, Letter to William Longman (1222) 20 Apr 1868, CW XVI, 1488.

qualities as a “negative thinker” who sees what is false, rather than true, and he certainly does not present himself pressing forward with a Humean research agenda when he claims that “if Bentham had merely continued the work of Hume, he would scarcely have been heard of in philosophy.”⁵²

There may be other sources for an argument that the attribution of noncognitivism that *can* be justified, and I wish to anticipate one possible suggestion. We might wonder whether Auguste Comte’s positivism provides the context for the development of a noncognitivist metaethic. Perhaps a parallel can be drawn by relating Comte’s nineteenth-century positivism to the logical positivism that emerged in the twentieth century. Ethical theories that became popular during the dominance of logical positivism were concerned to account for an ethical discourse that appears to make no verifiable claims about the world. So, too, it might be suggested, Mill’s ethics emerges in the wake of Comte’s positivism and makes an analogous move. Similar causes – the attempt to locate the moral in a world of only sense experience – lead to similar results. Yet, such an argument would have to be mounted in detail in order to be properly assessed and to overcome the charge of anachronism – there is little evidence this is how Mill reacted to Comte’s work, and one paragraph of armchair history of philosophy is worth little.⁵³ And, additionally, I now wish to suggest, any such argument would have to deal with a further serious difficulty.

4.2 Noncognitivism and the Constraint of Evidence

Having dealt with the textual evidence in section 3, let us attempt a reconstruction of what remains of the argument for reading Mill as a noncognitivist. Ryan holds that the noncognitivist interpretation explains Mill’s clear statements in *Utilitarianism* sections I.5 and IV.1–3 that “questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof.”⁵⁴ Mill held that foundational norms were not amenable to proof; a noncognitive interpretation coheres well with this position and therefore garners support by making it more intelligible. Call this the *argument from no proof*. As with other “best explanation” arguments, the argument from no proof will be undermined if it is shown that it suffers unexpected interpretative costs, and further weakened by showing that there is an alternative reading that will suffice to account for the position it explains. Both of these tasks, I think, can be accomplished.

The interpretative cost of Ryan’s argument is this: the argument from no proof shows rather more than it ought to. It is true that Mill is unambiguous in his claim that foundational norms are not subject to proof, and that this stance is in need of explanation. “Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof.”⁵⁵ But it seems clear that he *does* believe that evidence can be given for these norms. “The sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.”⁵⁶ Any interpretation of Mill must take place within confines which allow for such evidence. Psychological dispositions are used to give evidence for norms, and evidence pertains to the cognitive. To reverse Ryan’s argument: evidenced, after all, is shorthand for “evidenced true.” That is to say, it is not clear that a noncognitive interpretation of Mill which would vindicate the “no-proof-for-foundational-norms” conclusion would not equally well vindicate a “no-evidence-for-foundational-norms” conclusion. But *this* conclusion

⁵²Mill, *Bentham*, CW X, 80.

⁵³Indeed, there is evidence that this is not how Mill reacted to Comte’s work. Mill’s opinion of Comte’s philosophy is significantly lowered by Comte’s attempt to dispel traditional moral claims as strictly meaningless metaphysics. He writes that Comte “seems to think that a theory of natural history of society is the whole of social philosophy, practical as well as theoretical, and that any attempt at an accurate definition or philosophical estimation of Ends is a needless, if not mischievous, subtlety.” (Mill, *System*, VI.xii.6, CW VIII, 950n).

⁵⁴Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 4, CW X, 234.

⁵⁵Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 1, CW X, 207.

⁵⁶Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 4, CW X, 234.

would clearly be unacceptable.

The point can be presented as follows: why is it that Mill does not believe proof can be given for foundational norms? The suggestion is made that Mill holds that they are not truth-amenable and, therefore, not in the business of being provable. Yet, their truth-inaptitude would show them not only to be nonprovable, but also not evidentially-supportable. This goes too far, however; Mill clearly thought that evidence *could* be offered for final ends.

Of course, the argument from no proof can be repaired, if it can be shown how something can be evidentially-supported while remaining unprovable on grounds of truth-inaptitude. But no such argument has been given by supporters of the noncognitivist interpretation. And, indeed, this is unlikely to be a profitable path to follow. For Mill, the line between evidence and proof is not thick enough for us to claim that truth-inaptitude allows for one and not the other. Proof, for Mill the empiricist, is merely a particularly strong and convincing variety of inductive verification, and cannot be divorced from evidence in this manner. For this reason, in a note to *Utilitarianism*, Mill is comfortable in talking about “the kind and degree of evidence which constitutes scientific proof.”⁵⁷ Though not all evidentially supportable things will be provable, those things we can give evidence for are *akin* to those things we can give proof for: they are both, in this case, truth-apt.

Moreover, there is an alternative reading of Mill that suffices to account for his claim that there can be no proof of the utility principle: we simply *do not need* the noncognitivist reading to do this explanatory work. Mill offers the following explanation as to why the utility principle is unprovable. “To be incapable of proof by reasoning is common to all first principles; to the first premises of our knowledge, as well as to those of our conduct.”⁵⁸ Mill seems clear in this passage that it is *as a first principle* that the desirability of happiness cannot be proven. First principles are not subject to prior demonstration. The analogy offered is with the foundations of theoretical knowledge. While it is unclear from this passage exactly what “first premises of our knowledge” Mill has in mind, it would be odd to claim that what I take to be the likely candidates – the principle of induction and the reliability of seeming memories – are not truth amenable. Rather, *being first premises*, they cannot be proved, though their truth can certainly be vindicated through time.⁵⁹

5 Conclusion

I have argued that there are significant reasons to doubt the received noncognitivist reading of Mill. The interpretation does not enjoy as much textual support as has been generally thought, and it must answer the charge of anachronism and account for the possibility of evidence for the desirability of pleasure. Moreover, the noncognitivist reading seems undermotivated: there is an alternative explanation for Mill’s claim that the principle of utility cannot be proven.

All this, of course, is not to deny that Mill shares key features that have been associated with noncognitivist positions. The expressivist impulse to tie moral evaluation to the moral sentiments is fundamental to Mill’s account of our ethical life. A cultivation of appropriate moral sentiments is a central goal of Mill’s work, and he connects closely the moral rightness of

⁵⁷Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 5, CW X, 258n.

⁵⁸Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 4, CW X, 234.

⁵⁹Mill, *System*, III.iv.2 and Mill, *Examination*, ch. 10, CW IX, 165n. Miller has recently argued that the nonproof “proof,” “incorporates a move that provides intellectual support for some proposition and yet that is not an inference” that amounts to a “coming to know something on the basis of intuition” (Miller, *J.S. Mill*, 38, 44). I agree with this analysis. Though he was vocal against intuitionism, it is not clear that, in attempting to ground the epistemology of practical and theoretic reason on primitive psychological dispositions, Mill does not himself appeal to something close to an intuition. Miller offers the theoretical parallel of the reliability of seeming memory; it seems likely to me that Mill adopts both this and the principle of induction as something akin to theoretical intuitions.

an action to a moral emotion. “We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience.”⁶⁰ Clearly, Mill believes that we ought to feel guilty when having violated a moral law. But a belief that there should be an emotional significance to moral judgment does not amount to the claim that apparent moral judgment is really just a disguised expression of emotion – noncognitivist should not be thought to have a monopoly on the moral feelings.

The question is not whether Mill believes that there is a connection between moral evaluation and the sentiments. As he himself writes, “nobody denies the existence of moral feelings. The feelings exist, manifestly exist, and cannot be denied.”⁶¹ The question is rather of the relationship between those sentiments and the act of judgment that leads to belief formation. A cognitivist Millian account will be that certain acts of judgment themselves occasion reasons to feel and act. The judgment that I have acted immorally is an appropriate occasion for a feeling of guilt, but that need not mean that it is merely the expression of a guilty feeling. Of course, Mill does not subscribe to an inert moral intellectualism – but his belief that there is an emotional significance to moral judgment does not commit him to believing that moral statements are inapt for truth evaluation either.

There are, of course, questions to be answered for one offering a cognitivist reading of Mill. As was alluded to above, any such interpretation must remain faithful to his naturalism but must be nonreductive. Among the most pressing issues are the details of the metaphysics and epistemology of Mill’s normativity: what Mill thinks norms *are* and what the nature of our cognitive contact with them is. These, however, are questions that must be tackled on another occasion.⁶²

⁶⁰Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 5, CW X, 246. We should pay attention also to Mill, Letter to W. G. Ward 28 Nov 1859 (432), CW XV, 649. Here, Mill writes of “those who have a true moral feeling, that is, a feeling of pain in the fact of violating a certain rule ... It appears to me that to them the word ought means, that if they act otherwise, they shall be punished by this internal, perfectly disinterested feeling.” This might be thought to indicate a position that involves reduction of ‘ought’ to the anticipation of guilt. Though Mill does here equate the *meaning* of ‘ought’ with a moral emotion, he also talks in this passage of those who possess *no* moral feeling in using the word ought. Moreover, of the moral feeling, he notes, “I do not think that it is exactly of the same nature, or has exactly the same origin, in all who have it.” It certainly does not seem that Mill is committed to any simply linguistic reduction of ought to moral emotion, then. I thank Dale Miller for drawing the relevance of this letter to my attention.

⁶¹Mill, *Sedgwick’s Discourse*, CW X, 51.

⁶²I would like to thank Ruth Boeker, Dan Labriola, Dale Miller, Jonathan Riley, Ben Saunders, and John Skorupski for offering comments on early drafts of this paper.