Mill and the *Gorgias*

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John Stuart Mill thought himself more indebted to Plato for his mental culture than to any other author. A study of his *Gorgias* translation and notes shows that arguments in *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism* for individuality, freedom of discussion and the superiority of higher pleasures were probably shaped by that dialogue.

In a draft of his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill professed himself a pupil of Plato 'beyond any modern I know of except my father and perhaps beyond even him'.[1] In both draft and published version, Mill tells us that his father thought himself more indebted to Plato for his mental culture than to any other author. Mill declares he could give 'similar testimony in regard to myself'.[2] As Mill sees it, his debt is more to Plato's method and ethos than to his doctrines, but, as one of Plato's pre-eminent modern pupils, one would expect him to have been subject to a variety of influences. Here I will provide evidence that one of the dialogues, the *Gorgias*, helped Mill formulate three key arguments found in *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*.

The *Gorgias* long had a special appeal for Mill. He first read it at the age of thirteen, prepared a translation sometime in the 1820s, and in 1834 published his version, together with notes, in the *Monthly Repository*.[3] For his 1866 review of George Grote's study of Plato, he reread the entire Platonic corpus in surroundings he described in an 1865 letter to Thomas Hare from Avignon:

> My occupation here, except letter writing, has been of a kind very remote from these [political] interests, being chiefly that of reading Plato, with a view to reviewing Grote's new book. I do not find that this by any means quickens my zeal in my own cause, as a candidate. It is an infinitely pleasanter mode of spending May to read the *Gorgias* and *Theaetetus* under the avenue of mulberries which you know of, surrounded by roses and nightingales, than

[1] John Stuart Mill, *The Early Draft of John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, Autobiography and Literary Essays, Collected Works* [hereafter *CW*], ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto, 1963), vol. 1, p. 24.

[2] Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 24–5. T. H. Irwin, 'Mill and the Classical World', *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski (New York, 1998), pp. 423–63; Karen E. Whedbee, 'An English Plato: J. S. Mill's *Gorgias*', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37.4 (2007), pp. 19–41; Antis Loizides, *John Stuart Mill's Platonic Heritage: Happiness through Character* (Plymouth, 2013).

[3] Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 25; *Earlier Letters*, *CW*, vol. 12, p. 8.

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it would be to listen to tiresome speaking for half the night in the House of Commons.[4]

Between his early and late readings of the *Gorgias*, it is probable that Mill studied the dialogue on many occasions. In his *Autobiography*, he tells us that in his years of 'youthful propagandism' he 'perpetually recurred' to books displaying 'the heroic virtue of these glorious representatives of the opinions with which I sympathized'.[5] One of these 'glorious representatives' was Socrates. That the *Gorgias* was among the books is suggested by Mill's specific references to Socrates' heroism in that dialogue in both the translation notes and the Grote review. In the latter, Mill says Socrates 'inspires heroism, because he shows himself a hero'.[6] It seems likely, then, that he 'perpetually recurred' to it in his youth, that he at least occasionally did so afterward, and that these readings and his efforts in translating the dialogue made him as thoroughly familiar with its scenes and arguments as one would expect of a pre-eminent pupil.

That is not to say that Mill fully accepted the arguments. The notes do praise the display of Plato's 'dialectical powers' in the dialogue, but in both notes and review, Mill plainly states that Plato's arguments are not compelling. In the review, he calls the dialogue 'brilliant', but also claims that 'this great dialogue' is 'in mere argument . . . one of the weakest of Plato's works'.[7] He refers to Grote's passage on Aristotle's story of the Corinthian cultivator who, upon reading the *Gorgias*, abandoned his fields and vines and came straight to Athens to study with Plato. Mill attributes this 'striking manifestation' of 'psychagogic efficacy' not to the dialogue's arguments ('nearly all of them fallacious') but to its ethos, to its appeal to the feelings and imagination.[8] Mill's judgement here is precisely what it was thirty years before in the translation notes: it also reflects his general contention that love of virtue can never be 'effected through the intellect'.[9]

Rather, Mill attributes the appeal of the dialogue to Plato's moving portrayal of the virtuous life. He thinks Plato 'resembles Christ in the love which he inspires' for virtue and in 'the stern resolution never to swerve from it, which those who can relish his writings naturally feel when perusing them'.[10] He regards Plato's teaching of a 'disinterested preference of duty for its own sake' as 'one of the greatest [steps]

[4] Mill, *Later Letters*, *CW*, vol. 16, p. 1061.
[5] Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 115.
[6] Mill, *Gorgias*, *CW*, vol. 11, p. 149; Grote's Plato, *CW*, vol. 11, p. 416.
[7] Mill, Grote's Plato, pp. 415–416; *Gorgias*, p. 97.
[8] Mill, Grote's Plato, p. 415.
[9] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 150.
[10] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 150.

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ever made in moral culture'.[11] His apology for the inadequacy of his translation testifies to the influence the *Gorgias* had on him:

> [T]he present writer regrets that his imperfect abstract is so ill fitted to convey any idea of the degree to which this dialogue makes the feelings and course of life which it inculcates commend themselves to our inmost nature, by associating them with our most impressive conceptions of beauty and power.[12]

My own readings of *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty* persuade me that, besides this general appeal, the *Gorgias* had several particular influences on Mill's thought – that Callicles' arguments influenced Mill's case for freedom for the genius or experimenter in living in *On Liberty*, that Socrates' account of the value of dialogue provided a key idea for Mill's argument for freedom of discussion, and that the problems of pleasures revealed in the *Gorgias* contributed to Mill's central argument for distinguishing qualities of pleasures in *Utilitarianism*.[13]

Mill's argument in *On Liberty* for self-assertion by persons of genius is many-sided. He reasons from the social progress evident in earlier periods of individuality, as well as from the social stagnation evident when individuality has been suppressed. His reading of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* prompted concern over a democratic future threatened by a tyranny of majority opinion. In assessing the various threats to individuality, Mill inquired into the effects of freedom of action and its suppression on human nature itself. It is in this context that Callicles' argument for self-assertion seems to have influenced him.

In *On Liberty*, Mill utterly rejects asceticism such as the Calvinists practice, asserting that such restraint 'kills' human nature within a person. By dint of not following their own nature, such persons cease to have a nature to follow, he says.[14] The language is similar to that used by Callicles in the *Gorgias* in opposing temperance for making men like '[s]tones, and the dead'.[15] Both men see desires as the source of action and achievement and both oppose restraint as likely to narrow and dwarf us. Callicles argues: 'I freely tell you that what is noble and just by nature, is that he who would live well, should allow his desires to attain the greatest possible strength, and never restrain

[11] Mill, Grote's *Plato*, p. 416.

[12] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 150.

[13] This is not to deny the influence of other dialogues. Book 9 of the *Republic*, for example, includes an extended discussion of how pleasures may be distinguished and judged.

[14] Mill, *On Liberty*, *CW*, vol. 18, p. 265.

[15] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 127.

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them . . .'.[16] Mill, too, recognizes the value of strong desires: 'To say that one person's desires and feelings are stronger and more various than those of another, is merely to say that he has more of the raw material of human nature, and is therefore capable, perhaps of more evil, but certainly of more good.'[17]

Mill agrees with Callicles that strong desires are not wrong in themselves. In his view, any missteps attributable to desires result from a lack of 'balance': 'strong impulses are only perilous when not properly balanced; when one set of aims and inclinations is developed into strength, while others . . . remain weak and inactive'.[18] The 'more good' resulting from balanced self-assertion was, of course, social rather than merely individual for Mill.

That the many, incapable of such an assertive life, seek to bind down the superior few through the restraints of customs, institutions and public opinion is a related view of Callicles that seems to have influenced Mill. Callicles argues that the many, '[f]earing lest the more energetic, who are capable of attaining superiority, should attain it over them, . . . call it base and unjust to take more than other people . . . . For they, being feebler, are contented with equality.' But, their restraints will prove ineffective 'if a man arises, adequately endowed by nature'. Such a man 'breaks through, and shakes off these fetters, and, trampling upon our statutes and charmed words, and all institutions contrary to nature, rises up our master, no longer our slave, and the justice of nature shines forth in him'.[19] There is an echo of this passage in Mill's argument that 'persons of genius' cannot be expected to conform to conventions:

> If they are of a strong character, and break their fetters, they become a mark for the society which has not succeeded in reducing them to commonplace to point at with solemn warning as 'wild,' 'erratic,' and the like, much as if one should complain of the Niagara river for not flowing smoothly between its banks like a Dutch canal.[20]

The similarity of view is striking, as is the use of 'fetters' to refer to limits on 'persons of genius' in both Mill's translation of Callicles' remark and in his own argument in *On Liberty*. The ends sought are, of course, not the same – for Mill, mainly social benefits and, for Callicles, what he took to be natural justice.

Another probable influence of the *Gorgias* may be found in Mill's account of liberty of discussion. Mill contends that our confidence in

[16] Mill, *Gorgias*, pp. 126–7.
[17] Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 263.
[18] Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 263.
[19] Mill, *Gorgias*, pp. 121–2.
[20] Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 268.

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our opinions should depend on the lack of contradiction by others free to contradict them. In Mill's words, 'the beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded'.[21] The failure of any and all to offer refuting arguments is, in such cases, the best evidence we can have that there are not any. This is essentially a generalization of Socrates' explanation in the *Gorgias* of his confidence in his views: 'For I always say the same thing, viz, that I do not myself know how these things are; that, however, no one, speaking in opposition to what has occurred to me on this subject, is able to avoid absurdity. I therefore lay down these things as true.'[22]

What is true of opponents generally is especially true of those who are frank, wise and well-disposed toward us, like Callicles. Socrates compares such persons to the touchstones used to test for gold. He welcomes Callicles' opposition because he reasons that, if someone with Callicles' strong character and views can be convinced of the gold in Socrates' arguments, he will have the best possible reason for believing them to be true. In arguing in *On Liberty* for the value to us of those with views hostile to our own, Mill recognizes this value of touchstones.

The central argument in *On Liberty* for free discussion is largely an argument for Socratic discourse. In his *Autobiography*, Mill explains that 'the Socratic method, of which the Platonic dialogues are the chief example, is unsurpassed as a discipline for correcting the errors, and clearing up the confusions incident to the *intellectus sibi permissus*, the understanding which has made up its bundles of associations under the guidance of popular phraseology'.[23]

The last influence of the *Gorgias* I will consider may be found in Mill's reformulation of utilitarian theory. Both utilitarians and their critics had conflated higher and lower pleasures, with opposite effects. Critics viewed higher pleasures in the light of lower ones, resulting in an 'inveterate dislike' of all pleasure-seeking. Utilitarians were complacent in their quantitative judgements, as they seemed to coincide closely enough with their tacit awareness of differences in quality. Mill found both positions wanting and looked to our ethical experience in search of greater clarity. There he discovered a fundamental ethical fact – the 'unwillingness' of the considerate person to 'sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence'.[24] In his inquiry, in his recognition of kinds of pleasures and in his conceptualizing of his discovery, Mill received important help from the

[21] Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 232.
[22] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 137.
[23] Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 25.
[24] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, *CW*, vol. 10, pp. 211–12.

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Gorgias. Indeed, the key term in his analysis of our qualitative ethical experience in *Utilitarianism* was one he had applied in interpreting the *Gorgias* nearly thirty years before.

The *Gorgias* helped prepare Mill for reconceiving *Utilitarianism* by means of its several ways of distinguishing pleasures – according to their goodness or badness, their connection to mind or body, their intelligence or foolishness, and their production through art or routine. In distinguishing kinds of pleasures by their goodness and badness, the dialogue offered Mill a model for one aspect of his distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Socrates argues in the dialogue that the good and the pleasant are not the same and he criticizes Callicles for affirming 'sweepingly that all who enjoy themselves, no matter how, are happy' and for making 'no distinction between good pleasures and bad ones'.[25] Because the pleasant and good are not the same, the conclusion is reached that, as Mill translates it, 'the pleasant ought to be done for the sake of Good, not Good for the sake of the pleasant'.[26] Because the pleasant is subordinate to the good, pleasures are of two kinds – those that conduce to the good and those that do not. Good pleasures are directed by knowledge, which will lead us to 'always do what is fitting, both towards gods and men'.[27] The absence of knowledge leads us into foolish pleasures, such as those afforded by cosmetic and cookery in regard to the body and rhetoric and sophistic in regard to the mind. Their foolishness results from ignorance of the fittingness of actions for reaching a good end.

The *Gorgias* also provided Mill with a second division of pleasures – into those which pertain to the mind and those which pertain to the body. Pleasures of the body are the primary goals of cookery and cosmetic, which are described as techniques or routines, whereas pleasures of the mind are the main goals of rhetoric and sophistic, also just routines. The *Gorgias* does not equate the previous distinction of good and bad pleasures with the present one of mental and bodily pleasures. To see why not, consider that when mere routines produce mental pleasures, these pleasures are not properly ordered to ends and to the good. As Mill translates, the routines of rhetoric and sophistic 'consider only the pleasures of the mind, and the means of producing them, never considering or caring for the difference between a better pleasure and a worse'.[28]

The inability of such techniques or routines to distinguish better and worse pleasures prompts another distinction – between art and mere

[25] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 128.
[26] Mill, *Gorgias*, pp. 131, 135.
[27] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 136.
[28] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 132.

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technique. Routines lack knowledge, especially of ends. Arts possess such knowledge and thereby are able to avoid the foolishness of mere knacks. To illustrate, Socrates argues:

> cookery is only a kind of skill, but that medicine is an art: because medicine has considered the nature of the thing which it aims at producing, and the causes of the operations which it enjoins, and can render an account of them; but cookery has not considered the nature or the causes of Pleasure, which is its sole end, but goes to work empirically and unscientifically, a mere uncalculating routine . . .[29]

It thereby lacks the capacity to determine what is truly good for us.

Along with these various divisions of pleasures, Mill found in the *Gorgias* an experiential basis for distinguishing them by quality – a sense of what he calls a higher 'comfort' contrasted with a sense of disease:

> Those only will go along with Socrates in the preceding dialogue, who already feel that the accordance of their lives and inclinations with some scheme of duty is necessary to their comfort; whose feelings of virtue are already so strong, that if they allow any other consideration to prevail over those feelings, they are really conscious that the health of their souls is gone, and that they are, as Plato affirms, in a state of disease.[30]

This 'scheme of duty necessary to their comfort' is close to the 'sense of dignity' of *Utilitarianism*. What Mill says of a 'sense of dignity' there, that it becomes 'so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them', closely parallels the comment on the *Gorgias* just quoted.[31] Also extremely close to it is Mill's explanation of duty in *Utilitarianism* – 'a feeling in our own mind; a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty, which in properly cultivated moral natures rises, in the more serious cases, into shrinking from it as an impossibility'.[32] So close is the reasoning that it seems fair to conclude that the *Gorgias* interpretation was a source for the *Utilitarianism* passages.

Moreover, our understanding of the superiority of a higher grade of existence to a lower is conceptualized by Mill using the same term both in his notes on the *Gorgias* and in *Utilitarianism*. In the notes, Mill tells us that it was Plato's achievement to have shown 'the superior dignity and eligibility of a virtuous life'.[33] In *Utilitarianism*, it is this

[29] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 132.
[30] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 150.
[31] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 212.
[32] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 228.
[33] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 97.

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very term 'dignity' that Mill, with the greatest of care, finally settles on as best suited to convey the central experience underlying his own qualitative *Utilitarianism*. After weighing 'pride', 'love of liberty and personal independence', 'love of power' and 'love of excitement' and finding them all suggestive, but not entirely adequate, he turns to 'dignity' as best conveying what raises higher pleasures so far above their lesser kin: 'its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or another, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties . . .'.[34] This sense of dignity, discovered in the ethos of the *Gorgias*, allows us to find no pleasure in whatever sinks us to a 'lower grade of existence', while, at the same time, smiling on pleasures that gratify the 'higher faculties'. It is the basis for Mill's qualitative utilitarianism.

The role of the 'sense of dignity' should be seen in the light of the *Gorgias*' contrast between the 'good for the sake of the pleasant' and the 'pleasant for the sake of the good'. The 'sense of dignity' provides a way of joining the two – of preserving pleasure as the standard, while avoiding the foolishness of unintelligent pleasures revealed in the dialogue. In effect, it incorporates intelligence into Mill's higher pleasures. The intelligence involved is of two sorts – in relation to the world and in relation to ourselves. Lower pleasures make a person 'devoid of every feeling or care but those which centre in his own miserable individuality'.[35] Mill contrasts such pleasures 'of mere sensation' with the higher 'pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments'.[36] Besides engaging us with the world, higher pleasures have a second kind of intelligence. They make us self-aware, by means of the self-assessments Mill locates within them. Because the sense of dignity at the heart of these self-assessments is 'so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong', Mill tells us that 'nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them'.[37] No lower pleasure could be desired 'otherwise than momentarily' because, in the cultivated, the sense of dignity is present 'otherwise than momentarily'. The failure of lower pleasures to meet this threshold test of consonance with dignity permits a rule-utilitarian choice of higher pleasures.

The incorporation of reflectiveness into the higher pleasures is confirmed by Mill's 'test of quality' in pleasures – 'the preference felt by those, who in their opportunities of experience, *to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation*, are best

[34] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 212.
[35] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 216.
[36] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 211.
[37] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 212.

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furnished with the means of comparison'.[38] Interestingly, the *Gorgias* likewise refers to minds habitually self-conscious and self-reflective, calling them 'considerate minds', and contrasting their possessors with 'the unreflecting', who are deceived by apparent goods, dressed up as 'the most valuable of all things'. With the unreflecting, it is as if 'the body were not governed by the mind, but governed itself; [as] if Cookery and Medicine were not surveyed and discriminated by the mind, but were to be judged by the body, taking its own gratification for the standard'.[39]

Because Mill's 'higher pleasures' are pleasures, they are experienced, can be examined, and can provide the empirical grounding Mill always sought. Because they are 'higher' and include within themselves the sense of dignity which is 'so essential' and so constantly reflective, higher pleasures are necessarily intelligent, self-conscious and self-critical and so can never be inconsistent with our humanity – or with any criticism based on it, as they are simply defined so as to incorporate any such criticism. Thus, Mill argues that any sanction another theory of morality avails itself of is available also to utilitarianism.[40]

Mill's interest in combining pleasure with knowledge and the good stretches back to the *Gorgias* notes. The *Gorgias* highlighted the problem of unintelligent pleasure and Mill thought its lesson for the morally mature clear: the 'accordance of their lives and inclinations with some scheme of duty is necessary to their comfort'. A similar joining of pleasure and intelligence is evident in *Utilitarianism* when Mill writes of the 'sense of dignity' present only in higher pleasures, of which it is the self-conscious centre. The difficulty with these formulations is that, in the end, they treat the good as a matter of experience or satisfaction. They subordinate the good to the pleasant, though a pleasant understood as looping ahead to encompass an intelligent assessment of itself.[41]

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[38] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 214; emphasis added.
[39] Mill, *Gorgias*, p. 109.
[40] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 228.
[41] To my late parents, Paul and Elizabeth Nordquest, I owe, along with so much else, my first and best introduction to the 'sense of dignity'. I am grateful, too, to the *Utilitas* readers of the manuscript for their valuable suggestions for its revision.

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