Mill, Sentimentalism and the Problem of Moral Authority

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Mill's aim in chapter 3 of *Utilitarianism* is to show that his revisionary moral theory can preserve the kind of authority typically and traditionally associated with moral demands. One of his main targets is the idea that if people come to believe that morality is rooted in human sentiment then they will feel less bound by moral obligation. Chapter 3 emphasizes two claims: (1) The main motivation to ethical action comes from feelings and not from beliefs and (2) Ethical feelings are highly malleable. I provide a critical examination of Mill's use of these claims to support his argument that Utilitarianism can preserve morality's authority. I show how the two claims, intended to form a significant rebuttal to the worry about Utilitarianism, can in fact be combined to raise powerful skeptical concerns. I explain how Mill evades the skepticism, and why contemporary philosophers who lack Millian optimism about human nature find it harder to avoid the skeptical outcome.

When Mill published *Utilitarianism* as a book in 1863, hoping to further the acceptance of utilitarian morality, he was well aware of the doubts about whether people would care enough about morality under the utilitarian conception. He writes:

> There is, I am aware, a disposition to believe that a person who sees in moral obligation a transcendental fact, an objective reality belonging to the province of 'Things in themselves,' is likely to be more obedient to it than one who believes it to be entirely subjective, having its seat in human consciousness only.[1]

Mill identifies a concern here not with the moral norms espoused by utilitarianism (the importance of increasing pleasure, minimizing pain, and so on) but rather with the utilitarian view of where morality comes from, i.e. human sentiment. What effect would, and should, widespread cultural acceptance of this view of morality's origins have on moral commitment? If morality is not (in some sense) objective, does it follow that morality is therefore less important than it is typically and traditionally taken to be? Mill wants to reply, as the allusion to Kant in the opening quotation suggests, to those who worry about deriving morality's authority from the contingencies of human psychology. His

[1] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 75.

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aim is to repudiate, in particular, the suggestion that morality is in any sense less important if it is understood as rooted in human emotion.

Mill's discussion of these matters, as Roger Crisp among others has noted, has suffered neglect compared to the other chapters of *Utilitarianism*, notwithstanding the fairly prominent role Mill's discussion of these issues plays in Christine Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity*.[2] However, philosophical discussions of the genealogy of morality, especially naturalistic accounts of the origins of morality, are now generating the kind of philosophical attention and excitement that they have not experienced for a long time. Furthermore, Mill is addressing a concern that continues to draw widespread support in the world today, namely that a secular and naturalistic conception of morality will somehow diminish morality's authority and that people will behave in worse ways as a result. It is illuminating and instructive to read chapter 3 in light of these contemporary interests and concerns.

I. SENTIMENTALISM AND MORAL AUTHORITY

Mill's aim in chapter 3 of *Utilitarianism* is to combat the idea that if morality is 'merely' a matter of feeling it follows that morality will lose its 'binding force'.[3] Mill does not neatly distinguish whether the concern is that utilitarianism will undermine the motivational force or the normative force of moral claims: he tends, here at least, to associate the two senses of force. The close association, while perhaps not helpful for certain purposes,[4] makes considerable sense in this context as Mill's concern is morality's authority. If moral claims have authority then this certainly involves more than the idea that they are reliably followed: the fact that people are moved by a claim does not *ipso facto* legitimate it. But, on the other hand, it is tempting to think that motivating power is a necessary if not sufficient condition of morality having authority. To adapt some words of John Rawls, a conception of morality 'is seriously

[2] See Roger Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 90, and Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 78–86. My discussion of Mill on these matters is clearly indebted to Korsgaard's discussion. I speculate that one reason for chapter 3's comparative neglect is the influence of an idea that (ironically) one sees emerging in inchoate form in the chapter itself: the idea that metaphysical and epistemological considerations are irrelevant or neutral with regard to moral claims. This idea became conceptually (and, later, professionally) enshrined in the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics.

[3] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 73.

[4] The two kinds of force need to be separated in order to discuss the relationship between how moral people are and how moral people should be. One could hold that people are not naturally suited to living morally and yet still think that moral concerns should, as a normative matter, be given the highest importance. Alternatively, one might think that humans are easily 'moralized' but consider them mistaken, from a normative point of view, in giving high priority to the demands of morality.

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defective if the principles of moral psychology are such that it fails to engender in human beings the requisite desire to act upon it'.[5] We can think of this as the demand that an adequate conception of moral norms accord with what has been dubbed the 'practicality' of moral judgment.[6]

Mill's subject is the psychological or motivational implications of an adequate conception of moral authority. His concern, after all, is with the idea that if people come to believe that morality is rooted in human sentiment then they will feel less bound by moral obligation on those occasions when morality dictates something other than what they want. To adapt one of Mill's pointed questions: 'If my own happiness lies in something else, why may I not give that the preference?'[7] And this has been the nagging worry about sentimentalist conceptions of moral authority: that they cannot adequately capture the sense in which one is beholden to do the morally right thing even when one is inclined to do otherwise. This is why there is a longstanding association of moral sentimentalism with moral skepticism.[8]

Mill wants to show how a sentimentalist conception of morality does not undermine the binding power of moral duty. This does not mean that he has to provide an account of moral authority that gives moral demands such strong motivational power that they can never be resisted: the 'magnetism' of morality doesn't, as we know, attract everyone at all times. But he must show that taking on a sentimentalist account of the sources of normativity (to adopt Christine Korsgaard's nice phrase) would not have the effect of undermining people's commitment to morality. The moral skeptic, as Korsgaard puts it, thinks that once we see 'what is really behind morality, we won't care about it any more'[9] and what this suggests is that a non-skeptical conception of morality will not leave us cold to its claims. That is to say, satisfactory conceptions of morality will not undermine the sense of morality's importance: indeed, they must presumably preserve something at least close to the general, pre-reflective, sense of the importance of morality. The question is: can Mill's account do this?

[5] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 455.

[6] See, for example, Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 7. Note that we can think of the motivational power of morality as a given and then use this fact to test the explanatory appeal of rival moral theories. Alternatively, we can think of the practicality requirement as a normative demand on moral theories: i.e. they *ought* to sustain our ethical motivation.

[7] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 73.

[8] As Simon Blackburn puts it in *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), many think that his form of sentimentalism 'smells of sulphur' (p. vi). The accusation against sentimentalism, as his evocative phrase suggests, has a long history.

[9] Korsgaard, *Sources*, p. 14.

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II. AUTHORITY: PSYCHOLOGICAL NOT ONTOLOGICAL

Mill argues that for any individual, while there are a variety of possible sources of moral motivation external to the mind, what ultimately moves someone to act morally is a matter of feeling. He allows that moral motivation can derive from what he calls external sanctions but, as Roger Crisp rightly stresses, external sanctions ultimately consist in internal feelings: 'the *hope* of favour from others, *fear* of their anger, and *sympathy* for them'.[10] Mill calls unmediated inner concern the 'internal sanction' of morality and identifies it with conscience, which he in turn identifies with 'a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty'.[11] The important point to stress here is that, for Mill, the distinction between internal and external sanctions is a distinction that takes its place within the larger view that all moral motivation is rooted in sentiment.

This last point needs emphasis because the claim that the main motive to morality comes from feelings and not from beliefs is at the heart of Mill's answer to worries about a sentimentalist conception of moral authority. He writes: 'whatever a person's opinion may be on this point of Ontology [regarding the metaphysical nature of moral facts], the force he is really urged by is his own subjective feeling, and is exactly measured by its strength'.[12] This is why, Mill claims, there is no reason to fear that a change in belief in the source of moral authority (such as from transcendental facts to human feelings) will have a drastic impact on moral behavior. His answer to the worry is very Humean: metaphysical beliefs are too motivationally inert to be the crucial element in explaining and understanding our motivation to be moral. It is the nature of our feelings that is of central importance.

The problem with Mill's answer is that it begs the question. The question at issue is to what extent the *inner* feeling of being bound by morality depends for its existence on the belief that certain *external* facts obtain (that there are moral norms, for example, that are not the artifact of human sentiments). To assert, in this context, that the moral feelings would be there anyway (however things turn out in the external world) is to assume the claim that needed to be defended.[13] Mill, to his credit, realizes this and acknowledges as

[10] See Crisp's notes to chapter 3 in Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 128.
[11] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 74.
[12] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 75.
[13] Gilbert Harman uses a similar kind of argument to Mill in his 'Moral Relativism', *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, ed. G. Harman and J. J. Thompson (Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), although Harman's argument is on behalf of his moral conventionalism. Harman writes: '[I]t might be thought that morality loses its normative force if it does not have a nonconventional source. But that is just a mistake if moral conventionalism is true [for according to it] there is no such thing as objective absolute

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much:

> the notion therefore of the transcendental moralists must be, that this sanction will not exist *in* the mind unless it is believed to have its root out of the mind; and that if a person is able to say to himself, This which is restraining me, and which is called my conscience, is only a feeling in my own mind, he may possibly draw the conclusion that when the feeling ceases the obligation ceases, and that if he find the feeling inconvenient, he may disregard it, and endeavour to get rid of it.[14]

Mill expresses the worry well and, indeed, one would think that he would be well-placed to see it since his own idea of external sanctions depends on the idea that inner feelings can depend on matters external to the mind. The particular concern here is whether the sentimentalist can deliver an adequate conception of moral constraint. More specifically, as Mill observes, the concern is that if people come to a conception of the binding power of morality as self-imposed, doesn't this invite the thought that one can, as it were, unbind oneself the moment the constraints prove to be a nuisance?[15]

Mill understands the problem but his response is somewhat disappointing. He simply points out that people can and do ask 'Need I obey my conscience?' regardless of their view about the origins of moral authority. Mill is right, of course, to stress how anyone can come to question whether he or she should act morally on one occasion or another: furthermore, we know that people act against their conscience regardless of their view (or absence of a view) regarding the metaphysical origins of morality. But, even if this is granted, one can still worry that sentimentalist theories leave moral authority in particularly bad shape,[16] and that if moral constraints are merely a matter of feeling then they are going to be weak in their binding power and especially subject to arbitrary or whimsical change. Hence the worry that, on the sentimentalist picture, if morality becomes inconvenient, it is likely to be dropped.

normative force. Morality does not lose that sort of normative force, because it never had it in the first place' (pp. 27–8). You can see Harman's point: if conventionalism is true, it is true already. But note also the problem with the argument: if moral conventionalism comes to be believed, then arguably something *will be lost* that was present in moral practice in the first place, namely the *belief* that morality has a non-conventional source. And the skeptical worry concerns what might follow from this lost belief.

[14] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 76.

[15] Or, to adapt a point of Anscombe's, whenever you want to unbind yourself, can't you always overturn the legislation by a vote of 1–0? Anscombe, of course, notoriously believed that any notion of self-legislation was incoherent because legislation requires a 'superior power' in the legislator. See G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 27. She names Kant as her target but does not consider, even to reject it, the Kantian idea that one aspect of the self can legislate over another.

[16] See Crisp's notes to chapter 3 in Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 129–30.

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The underlying challenge for Mill is to explain in more detail how acceptance of the sentimentalist account of moral authority would not (and should not) have a debunking effect on the authority of moral demands. Perhaps many who espouse sentimentalist theories continue to live in a way that shows a vivid respect for the force of moral concerns (as Mill did himself): the question is whether the moral experience and action of such people simply outstrips the explanatory resources of their officially espoused view. Thus the fact that sentimentalists appear to be capable of living their sentimentalism is, an anti-sentimentalist might claim, a misperception. This also suggests a corollary thesis: that if moral sentimentalists really were able to integrate their espoused moral theory into their lived experience they would not be able to experience the authority of moral conscience as they currently do. Mill recognizes this concern about sentimentalism but, at least in setting out his first reply, says very little to counter the allegation that sentimentalism would subvert moral authority by undermining the experience of binding moral constraint.[17]

III. EXTERNALITY AND AUTHORITY

It is tempting, as Mill does, and as I have done in elaborating Mill, to identify the problem of moral authority for the sentimentalist as fundamentally about the lack of *external* constraint on the person tempted to do something wrong. This is the language that J. L. Mackie uses when discussing concerns about the potentially skeptical effect of sentimentalist conceptions of ethics:

> It is a very natural reaction . . . to protest that there is more to ethics than this, something more external to the maker of moral judgements, more authoritative over both him and those of or to whom he speaks.[18]

And Crispin Wright, likewise, identifies worries about the psychological upshot of non-realist conceptions of ethics with the loss of an external sanction for morality:

> There may be a *psychological* problem: a tendency to cease to identify with those of one's opinions which philosophy discloses to lack an external sanction – to suffer a loss of moral problems, as it were.[19]

However, two points are in order here. First, we should note that for many people the focus on the importance of an external source

[17] Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons provide an excellent overview of this experiential or phenomenological demand on moral theories in 'Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory', *Philosophical Issues* 15 (2005), pp. 56–77.

[18] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 32.

[19] Crispin Wright, 'Truth in Ethics', *Truth in Ethics,* ed. Brad Hooker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 17.

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for morality comes from the view that moral norms are not binding (or, at any rate, are greatly diminished in their authority) if they lack an external source of enforcement. Mill agrees with this, and grants the need for society to establish a system of rewards and punishments in order to establish incentives to moral behavior for those whose conscience is lacking. These are the external sanctions, and Mill argues, plausibly enough, that there is no reason why a sentimentalist account of morality cannot make use of them (although there is a significant question regarding religious sanctions, as we shall see below). However, an adequate conception of moral authority, and Mill clearly understands this, needs to make sense of the internal commitment to moral concerns that goes beyond compliance for the sake of carrots and sticks. This is the challenge he is taking on, and it takes us to my second point.

One danger when discussing moral norms, as Kantians have stressed, is that of conflating externality and objectivity. One can think that there are fixed and objective moral constraints – constraints that cannot just be wished away – but that these moral constraints are internal or found inside the self.[20] We should therefore be wary of identifying the notion of binding norms with externality and lack of binding norms with internality. Mill and Kant are actually in agreement here: what needs to be offered is an account of the importance of morality that makes sense of why a person should feel bound by moral norms not just from without but from within.

IV. METAPHYSICS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MORALITY

Mill's description of the sentimentalist weaseling his or her way out of the constraints of moral norms ('This which is restraining me, and which is called my conscience, is only a feeling in my own mind') of course brings to mind Hamlet's famous line that 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'.[21] The underlying insinuation of that line seems to be that if value originates in the human mind then there cannot *really* be anything that is truly good or bad. But the concern of Mill's with which we opened, remember, was not that the sentimentalist cannot provide an account of moral obligation, but rather that the conception of moral obligation which the sentimentalist

[20] This, in a sense, is Kant's view, although of course the internal/external distinction is, in another sense, preserved by Kant, albeit now located inside the self. I discuss this distinction in relation to moral skepticism in section 5 of my 'Internalism and the Self: Lessons from Korsgaard's Kantian Critique of Williams', *Southwest Philosophy Review* 23.1 (Jan. 2007).

[21] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 216.

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offers somehow diminishes its importance. This is a not a worry about the reality of morality but about the preservation of its deliberative priority and importance.[22]

Why worry that a sentimentalist account of morality will undermine the kind of importance and priority traditionally accorded to moral concerns? After all, if a metaphysically deflationary account is given of moral values, then presumably the same kind of deflationary account will be given for other forms of value too (aesthetic, prudential, and so on) – and if all values are, as it were, deflated together, then why aren't their rankings in terms of importance vis-à-vis one another the same as they were prior to the deflation? If this is so, then although there might be an understandable sense of loss for the person who has come to a 'disenchanted' conception of the world, why should sentimentalism affect morality's importance in respect to other concerns?

Part of the answer, as Mill's quotation indicates, lies in the way the priority of moral concerns vis-à-vis other concerns has, at least traditionally, been precisely connected with the idea that moral values have a greater metaphysical depth than other values (most obviously in the form of religious cosmologies). Thus if the deeper metaphysical status of morality adds to morality's authority over more metaphysically 'shallow' concerns (such as selfish pleasure or personal advancement), then metaphysical deflation threatens to affect moral value more than other values. Think about the case of motivation for reasons of self-interest. It is hard, one might think, to see how people's tendency to be moved by their self-interest would be changed by a metaphysically deflationary account of self-interest: this is something that will be pursued anyway.[23] In the case of morality, however, the concern is precisely that morality's 'metaphysical *gravitas*' is doing normative and motivational work.[24] This explains the concern that the metaphysical deflation of value does not affect all values equally – the worry is that since moral value was more metaphysically inflated than other values to begin with it stands to suffer more from deflation.[25]

[22] See my introduction to *Reading Bernard Williams*, ed. Daniel Callcut (London: Routledge, 2009).

[23] Note, however, that one could argue that the value given to self-interest is indeed underpinned by a mistaken metaphysics of the self. Derek Parfit argues this case in *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also Susan Wolf's rejoinder to Parfit: 'Self-Interest and Interest in Selves', *Ethics* 96 (July 1986), pp. 704–20. More generally, a number of political theorists have argued that modernity is characterized by, in C. B. Macpherson's phrase, a 'possessive individualism' that has metaphysical components.

[24] Wright, 'Truth in Ethics', p. 5.

[25] Charles Taylor has defended this view. See, for example, his 'Ethics and Ontology', *The Journal of Philosophy*, C.6 (June 2003), pp. 305–20. George I. Mavrodes argues for the importance of the 'deep grounding' (p. 220) of morality in 'Religion and the

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This does not yet provide an explanation of what it means for moral values to have greater metaphysical depth, and how exactly (if at all) metaphysical depth adds to the motivational or normative power of moral reasons. Is it supposed be just a brute fact that, say, a realist account of the ontology of moral facts has normative significance? How does the metaphysical constitution of moral reasons (say, natural versus non-natural) by itself do anything?

Perhaps the idea is that certain kinds of metaphysical picture are more inspiring, as some have found claims to the effect that we are created to be moral. Another alternative is that certain metaphysical pictures provide greater self-interested reason to be moral, as in claims to the effect that bliss unfailingly awaits the righteous. This last kind of claim is obviously an aspect of some religious conceptions of moral authority: God is always present to enforce the moral law, and to provide powerful motivation to humans to choose the morally right path. It is significant that both kinds of picture (obviously, the two are often combined) provide reasons to be moral that are free of contingency in the sense that (at least within the terms of the conception) one always has overriding reason to think of morality as in one's self-interest and/or of central importance to one's life.[26]

However, notice that both pictures provide sources of moral motivation that are very indirect and are closer to what Mill had in mind by external sanctions. Mill, regrettably, does not directly engage with the worry that morality's authority will be diminished if it loses the metaphysical resources offered by the external sanctions of religion. Indeed, as mentioned above, Mill argues that utilitarianism can help itself to all the external sanctions for morality, including religious

Queerness of Morality', *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). He defends the following claim (one that he associates with Platonism, Christianity, and, in this quotation, Kantianism): 'there cannot be, in any "reasonable way", a moral demand upon me, unless reality itself is committed to morality in some deep way. It makes sense only if there is a moral demand on the world too and only if reality will in the end satisfy that demand' (p. 220). Mavrodes argues, in effect, for the exact thesis that Mill aims to rebut, viz. that taking morality seriously is incompatible with the metaphysics of modern scientific naturalism.

[26] One might object, as Kant did, that the desire to avoid punishment (or receive reward) is not really a moral reason: nonetheless, as Kant also acknowledged, it *is* a reason to be moral (that is, to conform one's actions with moral norms). The presence of such metaphysical reasons within various models of morality – and what the consequences might be of removing such metaphysical guarantees (and thus exposing reasons to be moral to contingency and luck) – has been subjected to a deep exploration in the work of Bernard Williams. See, in particular, his 'Persons, Character and Morality' and 'Moral Luck', *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

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sanctions.[27] Mill suggests that there is no reason why 'hope of favour and the fear of displeasure from our fellow creatures or *from the Ruler of the Universe* . . . should not attach themselves to the utilitarian morality . . . as powerfully as to any other'.[28]

Mill's phrasing here is rather slippery (indeed, the whole paragraph from which this sentence is drawn needs to be read closely), and it is worth noticing that Mill is not exactly saying that his moral theory is compatible with religious belief. After all, he is a moral naturalist, is he not? What he says is that utilitarianism can still draw on the *fear* of (or love of) God. But this takes us back to a now familiar dialectic: would and should the inner emotional state (fear or love) exist without the belief regarding the outer world (i.e. in God's existence, and so on)?

Mill does not say, and his discussion of the external sanctions of religion thus comes off as evasive, or disingenuous, or potentially elitist and cynical.[29] He is clearly advocating a secular and naturalistic moral theory and, indeed, much of the interest in what he says in this chapter comes from the fact that he is (implicitly) defending the self-sufficiency of such a view. Hence a fuller and more satisfying answer to the skeptic about moral naturalism (and moral sentimentalism in particular) would, as Mill does not, explicitly respond to the objection that ethical thought and practice cannot get by without drawing on belief in the supernatural resources of religion.

V. SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

Mill has a second form of reply to those who worry about whether utilitarianism will undermine the authority of morality. He observes that, whenever a conception of morality is revisionary, it is likely to appear as having less authority than the 'customary morality'.[30] He argues that this is a fact that one can expect to change over time as the new morality itself becomes part of common sense.

Mill, at least when foregrounding this reply, tends to emphasize the malleability of human nature. He suggests that humans are sufficiently flexible that there ought to be no concerns about whether they can be raised to care about morality under a new conception. Never

[27] Mill clearly has Christianity primarily in mind, although he does cite other religions in *Utilitarianism*.

[28] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 74, emphasis added. One can see how remarks such as this point to the development (alluded to in n. 2 above) of a separation of the internal substantive content of morality from such matters as its metaphysical status. See also Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 68.

[29] There is a whiff of what Bernard Williams called 'Government House Utilitarianism' (which, in a nutshell, means: utilitarianism for the learned; whatever works best for the vulgar). See Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 108–10.

[30] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 73.

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underestimate, in other words, the power of upbringing. As Mill says: 'there is hardly anything so absurd or so mischievous that it may not, by means of these influences [those of upbringing], be made to act on the human mind with all the authority of conscience'.[31] This suggests that, for Mill, the question of sustaining commitment to morality is in large part a practical, social question of inculcating and sustaining sociably minded feelings. There should be no problem in accommodating people to the idea that the authority of moral norms derives from the power of human sentiment and not from a human-transcendent source.

However, one can also see here some internal tension in Mill's view, one which derives from Mill's conflict over how much to attribute moral feeling to nature or culture. His initial remarks regarding upbringing suggest that we can inculcate desires, through use of early example and sanctions, to do more or less anything. But Mill pulls back from this radical conclusion, and suggests that, nonetheless, if the motivation to utilitarianism is not rooted in a deep aspect of human nature, then there should be serious concerns about whether it can sustain reflective commitment. He writes:

> But moral associations which are wholly of artificial creation, when intellectual culture goes on, yield by degrees to the dissolving force of analysis; and if the feeling of duty, when associated with utility, would appear equally arbitrary; if there were no leading department of our nature, no powerful class of sentiments, with which that association would harmonize, which would make us feel it congenial, and incline us not only to foster it in others (for which we have abundant interested motives), but also to cherish it in ourselves; if there were not, in short, a natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality, it might well happen that this association also, even after it had been implanted by education, might be analyzed away.[32]

Mill needs moral sentiments to be malleable but not *too* malleable. He needs malleability if he is to defend his moral revisionism and, in particular, his claim that people can be educated to regard a utilitarian conception of moral norms as having all the binding power of traditional morality. But too much malleability threatens to aggravate rather than ease the worry about whether sentimentalism can provide an adequate conception of moral constraint: how can moral sentiments anchor moral norms if sentiments themselves are so easily recast?[33] Note that this is a particularly tricky problem for Mill the liberal, for in his moral and political philosophy he wishes to celebrate the flexibility of human

[31] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 77.
[32] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 77.
[33] Notice how anxiety over this question plays an important backdrop role in debates over genetic engineering and (so-called) enhancement technologies more generally since new technologies dramatically increase the power to change human nature (including human emotions).

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nature and to champion the importance of 'experiments in living'.[34] Mill qua liberal individualist and moral revisionist wants human malleability; Mill qua moral sentimentalist needs fixity, if moral norms are not going to dissolve upon reflection, and take on the authority-undermining appearance of arbitrariness.

Mill hopes to steer between this Scylla and Charybdis by emphasizing that the core sentiments of morality rest on the 'firm foundation' of our 'social feelings' towards others.[35] This means that the malleability of our moral sentiments, for Mill, must always been seen against the backdrop of what is not malleable (or, at least, is limited in malleability): our deep-seated concern for others, especially when it comes to their experience of pain or pleasure. This concern with the pain or pleasure of others, in Mill's view, is always present in any conventional human morality: it is the seed from which they have all grown.[36] This allows Mill to conceive of moral progress as an immanent process and he is thus able to soften the contrast between moral tradition and moral change: the envisaged progressive changes in morality emerge out of the utilitarian principle which has been there all along. Moreover, even if this concern for others is an ultimately contingent fact about human nature, it is not something which we are likely to experience as arbitrary.

VI. MILLIAN OPTIMISM

Mill's first reply to the skeptic about utilitarianism's ability to preserve the kind of importance typically and traditionally associated with morality in many ways circumvents the question by simply asserting that we just do care about it (which is to say, for Mill, that we care about the well-being of others). But, if his second reply is right, and sentiments are radically malleable, then it cannot simply be taken as a given that humans give priority to moral concerns. If human sentiments are as malleable as the second reply implies, then whether (and how much) we care about morality is up for grabs. The concern to establish morality on the firm foundation of human nature thus leads him to downplay his initial emphasis on the malleability of sentiment.

[34] John Stuart Mill, 'On Liberty', p. 58; *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

[35] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 77.

[36] Mill writes in *Utilitarianism*: '[A]s men's sentiments, both of favour and of aversion, are greatly influenced by what they suppose to be the effects of things upon their happiness, the principle of utility . . . has had a large share in forming the moral doctrines even of those who most scornfully reject its authority' (p. 51). Mill argues that application of the utility principle admits of 'indefinite improvement' (p. 70), but it is clear that he expects the pace of social improvement to increase once the 'tacit influence' (p. 51) of the utility standard on conventional morality (and on rival moral philosophies) is recognized and consciously affirmed.

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Chapter 3 does not provide a non-question-begging response to the worry that human care and concern for others will diminish without an attendant conception of metaphysical moral order to structure and reinforce these other-minded sentiments. This explains, in part, why chapter 3 is followed by a longer defense of the Humean position that subjective concern explains the existence of moral norms rather than vice versa. If such a defense is convincing, then concerns about abandoning a metaphysical conception of moral objectivity will be significantly allayed. If moral commitment does not depend on metaphysical beliefs, then removing those beliefs will leave moral motivation intact.

The word 'intact', however, is worth stressing, for the skeptic about Mill's sentimentalist grounding for morality need not hold (to reiterate an important point) that all care and concern for others would go away without a metaphysical grounding for moral objectivity. The skeptic need only hold that metaphysical beliefs play some significant role in structuring and reinforcing moral motivation. Bernard Williams was clearly sympathetic to this worry about the potentially deflating effects of naturalistic explanation, and this explains the skeptical turn that moral naturalism takes in his hands. Williams writes:

> [O]bligations might not come out of the [naturalistic] explanation with quite the resonance they seemed to possess before. Although it is likely that, after we have understood and accepted the explanation, we shall be able to go on living a life in which obligations play some role, some people might feel that this role was not enough, and that obligation had died under the explanatory knife.[37]

Part of the issue here is that Williams does not share Mill's optimistic and 'progressive' conception of human nature, and much of Williams' work is devoted to exposing the problems that open up for moral naturalism without such a conception.[38] The general thrust of Mill's response to such worries about moral naturalism is in keeping with a recent claim of Scanlon to the effect that the 'kind of *gravitas* [moral judgments] require is . . . not metaphysical but normative'.[39] We could

[37] Bernard Williams, 'The Primacy of Dispositions', *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 73. Notice that Williams is writing from the perspective of someone for whom moral naturalism is a revisionary position: this is the person for whom moral obligation might not have the resonance it once possessed. What about the person who was raised as a moral naturalist, we might wonder?

[38] John Skorupski has rightly stressed the importance of the progressive conception of human nature to Mill's thought: see his *John Stuart Mill* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 22–3, and his recent and engaging *Why Read Mill Today?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), ch. 2. For more on Williams, see my doctoral thesis, 'Bernard Williams and the End of Morality' (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003).

[39] T. M. Scanlon, 'Metaphysics and Morals', Presidential Address to the Eastern Division of The American Philosophical Association, *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association* 77.2 (Nov. 2003), p. 19.

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put the Millian response in rhetorical form: How could (and should) metaphysical models of moral objectivity have more normative and motivational weight than the substantial and earthly matter of people's happiness? No metaphysical authority for being concerned with others is, or should be, needed. Furthermore, no change in metaphysical beliefs is likely to stop our care for the pain or happiness of others. Utilitarianism's moral authority (or the authority of any other position for that matter) consists in the authority of the substantive answers that it gives to questions about how to live.

The substance of *Utilitarianism*'s guidance falls under the broad heading of the value of happiness yet Mill also suggests a more specific value that underlies the value of being moral: the value of being in unity and harmony with other people. This value has its roots in human nature, and when properly cultivated by education and celebrated by society can inspire people to promote the general happiness with (as he says of Comte's view) all the 'psychical power and social efficacy of a religion'.[40]

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[40] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 79. I have presented material from this article to audiences at Lewis and Clark College, UCL, Oxford University, Florida International University, Florida State University, and the University of North Florida. I am grateful for the criticisms and suggestions I received at these institutions. I am also grateful for the financial support and intellectual stimulation I received in the summer of 2005 (at Yale Law School) and 2006 (at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften) as a SIAS Summer Institutes Fellow. I owe special thanks to Jennifer Fisher, Josh Gert, Chris Grau, Brenda Heideman, Bert Kögler, Jerry Schneewind and Susan Wolf for conversations on these issues.

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