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ARTICLE

Two Pessimisms in Mill

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Abstract

Mill defines utilitarianism as the combination of a "theory of life" and a moral claim: only pleasure and freedom from pain are desirable as ends, and the promotion of happiness is the sole goal of moral action. So defined, utilitarianism is open to *ad hominem* pessimistic objection: a "theory of life" which entails the impossibility of happiness fits poorly with a morality centered on its promotion. The first two challenges Mill confronts in *Utilitarianism* share this pessimistic structure. Interestingly, however, these challenges paint inverted pictures of the best utilitarian life: one suggests this life is satisfying but ignoble, the other that it is noble but unsatisfying. I explain Mill's treatment of both challenges as genuinely pessimistic interpretations of utilitarianism's "theory of life." Read through the lens of Mill's engagement with pessimism, these challenges point to distinctive conceptions of dignity and satisfaction that play a significant role in Mill's ethics.

In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill describes a crisis in his early life, a period during which he found no value in his existence. This struck Mill as more than a personal misfortune: he feared that "the flaw in my life, must be a flaw in life itself" (*CW* 1.149). Mill's crisis, then, led to a natural engagement with pessimism, the claim that human happiness is an impossibility.[1]

[1]Although it is easy to recognize Mill's worry as an engagement with pessimism, Mill himself never describes it as such. This is unsurprising, as the term pessimism was just working its way into English during Mill's lifetime (see Zanker 2011: 84–86 for a history of the term's development). It is used to describe a sour attitude towards life as early as 1815, but does not become identified with a philosophical view about the impossibility of happiness until after Schopenhauer's rise to prominence in the 1850s. When James Sully published his *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* four years after Mill's death, it was still necessary to note that most English readers would be unfamiliar with the term's use to describe a philosophy rather than a disposition (Sully 1877: 1–2).

Mill's engagement with *political* pessimism has received some attention. A variety of papers (e.g., Adams 1992: 445–46; Corcoran 2019) have discussed Mill's struggle to believe in social and political progress. The pessimism I consider differs from this variety by a lack of focus on distributional concerns and the absence of a temporal dimension: the question is not whether *more* people will be happy tomorrow than today, but whether it is possible for any people to be happy at all. The pessimism I discuss likewise differs from what Messina calls Mill's "pessimism about human nature" (2020: 8): his fear that human beings have innate tendencies to treat each other unjustly. The question at hand is whether *any* human beings are capable of happiness, not whether they tend to find that happiness at each other's expense. Mill's engagement with this starker pessimism has not received significant attention outside of direct analysis of his crisis in the *Autobiography*.

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In what follows, I examine the first two challenges Mill confronts in *Utilitarianism*'s second chapter. I suggest that these challenges are best understood through the lens of Mill's engagement with pessimism. Both challenges share a common structure: each suggests utilitarianism entails the truth of pessimism, and each assumes that pessimism and utilitarianism cannot be true at once. I will refer to challenges to this structure as *pessimistic challenges*. They are a variety of *ad hominem* critique which suggests that a position is undermined by entailing a pessimism that is incompatible with it.[2]

Utilitarianism's second chapter is entitled "What Utilitarianism Is" (*CW* 10.209). It serves a clarificatory role. Later chapters offer positive arguments in utilitarianism's favor. Chapter 2 simply defends utilitarianism against misrepresentation.[3] The chapter opens with a two-part definition of utilitarianism: utilitarianism combines a moral claim – actions are right insofar as they promote happiness – with a "theory of life" – pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends (*CW* 10.210). The rest of the chapter rebuts *ad hominem* challenges to this position, replying to a series of critics who use these two utilitarian premises to ground unacceptable conclusions. Mill argues that these critics misconstrue the views they reject: the critics take utilitarianism to have these unfortunate implications because they misunderstand either the theory of life or the moral claim on which it is based.

It is in this context that Mill confronts the two pessimistic challenges I discuss. Like all challenges in the chapter, the first two build an *ad hominem* case against utilitarianism. What is distinctive about them is the structure of their critiques. Both challenges seek to create a tension between utilitarianism's two central views. They do this by arguing that utilitarianism's theory of life undercuts its moral claim. For reasons to be discussed below, these critics hold that if pleasure is the sole object of human desire, then human happiness is an impossibility.[4] If human happiness is an impossibility, then promoting it cannot be the goal of moral action. The utilitarian is forced to compromise one of the constitutive views of her philosophy: either her theory of life or her moral claim must go.[5]

Mill replies that these challenges misrepresent utilitarianism's theory of life by failing to recognize the diversity of human pleasure. The critics claim that identifying pleasure as the sole object of human desire entails the impossibility of human happiness. What really entails this, however, is identifying *an impoverished subset* of human pleasure as the sole object of human desire.

An extensive and helpful literature has built up around this response and its broader implications for Mill's qualitative hedonism. I will not contribute to that literature here. I am not directly interested in Mill's response to these challenges. Rather, I am interested in his reasons for taking them seriously. Although Mill thinks these critics

[2]Pessimistic challenges are *ad hominem* in the following sense: they are arguments built around premises accepted by an opponent rather than premises accepted by the person making the argument.

[3]Mill lays out this division of labor in the final paragraph of chapter 1 (*CW* 10.208).

[4]For convenience, I will speak of the utilitarian theory of life as identifying pleasure as the sole object of human desire. This abbreviates the theory, which recognizes freedom from pain as an object of desire on the same level as pleasure.

[5]These critics have different views about which part of utilitarianism should be abandoned. This difference does not change the structure of their critiques. Considered as *ad hominem*, both challenges gain their force by suggesting a tension between utilitarianism's central claims. That these critics also take utilitarianism's central claims to be in tension with the truth – that the first group takes utilitarianism to have a false theory of life and the second takes it to have a false moral claim – is not relevant to the charges' structure as *ad hominem* critiques.

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misrepresent utilitarianism's theory of life, he grants that their charges would go through were this not the case. He accepts, in other words, that pessimism really is entailed by the impoverished theory of life these critics attribute to utilitarianism. That Mill accepts this is particularly interesting due to the divergence between the critics' complaints about the pleasure desirer's best life. The first group suggests that this life would be satisfying but ignoble; the second, that it would be noble but unsatisfying. Mill accepts that the pleasure desirer's best life would be unhappy on either of these descriptions. My goal will be to bring out Mill's reasons for treating both of these challenges as genuinely pessimistic challenges. Mill grants that happiness would be equally out of reach were the best human life satisfying but ignoble or noble but unsatisfying. Why does he do so?

My approach will be most similar to that taken in accounts of Mill's crisis. Like this literature, I try to explain Mill's thought about potential obstacles to human happiness. By focusing on a different text, however, I highlight Mill's concern about a different set of obstacles. Thus, I will offer an account of Mill's reasons for endorsing two claims not yet discussed in the crisis literature: (1) a life that cannot be noble is unhappy, and (2) an unsatisfying life is unhappy.[6]

In offering this account, I hope to highlight Mill's possession of significant and distinctive ideas about the kinds of dignity and satisfaction essential to human happiness. Discussions focused on Mill's response to the challenges have no need to consider his conceptions of dignity and satisfaction in detail: a broad presentation is sufficient to ground important claims about Mill's qualitative hedonism.[7] By focusing on the challenges themselves, I give these features of Mill's ethics the detailed attention they deserve.

I. Pessimism and pessimistic challenges

In what follows, I offer an account of the first two anti-utilitarian challenges *as* pessimistic challenges. I understand a pessimistic challenge as one with two features: it suggests both (1) that a position is incompatible with pessimism and (2) that this same position entails pessimism. To see the challenges in these terms, it will help to first say more about how I understand pessimism itself.

Pessimism questions life's value to the one who lives it. One way to do this is by claiming that even the best possible human life falls short of happiness. A happy life is one that provides certain benefits to the person living it. In suggesting that human life cannot be happy, the pessimist claims that some of the benefits a happy life would provide are unavailable to us. She thus questions life's value to the one who lives it in the relatively mild sense of claiming that we never get quite as much out

[6]The crisis literature has discussed various claims with similar structures but notably different content. A life devoted to subjective pleasures is unhappy: such pleasures dissolve in the face of reason (Anderson 1991 and Vogler 2001). A life bound by rigid habits is unhappy: rigid habits create a mismatch between motivation and behavior (Millgram 2011). A life devoted to negative ends is unhappy: making life less bad cannot make it good (Setiya 2017). A life devoted to finite objects is unhappy: the pleasure we take in such objects runs out too soon (Heydt 2006). Mill can consistently worry about many different obstacles to happiness. The worries I focus on are of interest because they differ from these, not because they contradict them.

[7]To give a few examples: all Anderson 1991 and Brink 2013 need is the claim that the sense of dignity involves a non-hedonic value judgment; all West 2003 needs is the claim that the sense of dignity involves a second-order pleasure. These claims have significant implications for Mill's qualitative hedonism, but say little about the sense of dignity itself. Why does Mill consider this particular non-hedonic value judgment or this particular second-order pleasure so important?

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of our lives as the idea of happiness suggests. Alternatively, the pessimist might make a much stronger claim, asserting that even the best possible human life is not worth living.[8] On the first understanding, pessimism can allow that human life is more beneficial than harmful, as long as life's benefits still fall short of what the concept of happiness leads us to expect. On the second understanding, pessimism must assert that the preponderance of harmful over beneficial aspects of human life is so extreme that it would be better not to exist at all than to exist as a human being. For the purposes of this article, I will identify claims as pessimistic if they meet the demands of the first, weaker understanding of pessimism. I will, however, treat claims as bearing greater pessimistic force as they approach the requirements of the second understanding. When it is helpful to draw a distinction between these two varieties of pessimism, I will do so using the terms weak pessimism and strong pessimism, where weak pessimism refers to the claim that even the best possible human life is not a happy one, and strong pessimism refers to the claim that even the best possible human life is not worth living.

Having pointed to a place where pessimism allows some variety, it will help to note a few of its firmer limits. Thus, pessimism attributes a flaw to *life itself*: it views the impossibility of happiness as more than a contingent matter, asserting that human beings can *never* find happiness in our world. As such, the flaw a pessimistic claim points to must be a permanent feature of human life, not a temporary defect caused by circumstances that might credibly change.

Likewise, I take pessimism to have a specific conception of the happiness it denies. Happiness might be identified with a particular good, one of a potentially large number of things which contribute to life's value. This is how the term is used when happiness is identified directly with particular instances of pleasure, particular moments of contentment, etc. It is this understanding of happiness which underlies statements like, "I feel so happy right now," "She was such a happy child," etc. – phrases which suggest that happiness is a localized phenomenon, potentially characterizing some parts of a life but not others. The happiness which pessimism denies does not have this localized character. It involves a global judgment about the overall worth of an individual's life taken as a whole.[9] At bottom, the function of pessimistic claims is to question life's value to the one who lives it. As such, for a pessimistic claim to suggest happiness is impossible will be for it to suggest life is worth less to us on the whole than a truly happy life would be. This judgment is totalizing and global in the sense that it takes the overall worth of a human life as its object. In another sense, however, it is quite local and partial, for it asks only what such a life is worth *to the person leading it*. Thus, a pessimistic claim could not be answered either by identifying some particular good that life contains – say, pleasure – and calling it happiness, or by pointing to some benefit life provides a second party – say, God – whose interests are furthered by people leading lives that are of no benefit to themselves. Neither approach would counter the pessimistic claim that, when taken as a whole, life is worth less to those leading it than the idea of happiness suggests.

With these general remarks about pessimism out of the way, we are now ready to look at Mill's presentation of the particular pessimistic challenges he confronts in *Utilitarianism*.

[8]This was the standard claim during pessimism's nineteenth-century heyday (Beiser 2016: 4). Mill was intimately familiar with this view, describing his father's position in strikingly similar terms: James Mill "thought the most fortunate human life very little worth having" (*CW* 1.48).

[9]The distinction between these two uses of the term happiness is helpfully discussed in Annas 2004: 45–48 and Nussbaum 2008: S86–88.

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II. The first challenge: life as satisfying but ignoble

According to the first pessimistic challenge, a life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure is a base life. The identification of pleasure as the only thing desirable as an end thus entails that even the best human life will be base. Mill presents the critics' position as follows:

> To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure – no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit – they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine. (*CW* 10.210)

Mill accepts the pessimistic force of this challenge: instead of dismissing the relevance of nobility to happiness, he defends the nobility of the specifically human life of pleasure. Mill accepts the challenge's pessimistic force out of concern for the dignity of human nature: he affirms both that the dignity of human nature depends on the nobility of the best human life, and that human beings cannot be truly happy unless they bear dignified natures.

Mill is explicit in identifying the dignity of human nature as what is threatened by the denial of the best human life's nobility. Thus, his counter-charge is "that it is not [utilitarians], but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light" (*CW* 10.210). Likewise, he is explicit in claiming that human beings cannot be happy unless they see themselves as bearing dignified natures. He declares the sense of dignity an "essential [] part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong" (*CW* 10.212), and suggests that anyone who thinks life might be better in its absence "confounds the two very different ideas, of happiness and content[ment]" (*CW* 10.212). For Mill, to lose the sense of dignity is to lose part of what makes life worth living. Our desires might be satisfied in its absence (we might find "content[ment]"), but even their full satisfaction would not make life as valuable to us as the concept of happiness suggests. My goal in this section will be to explain Mill's acceptance of these two claims: why does Mill hold that the dignity of human nature depends on the nobility of the best human life, and that an appreciation of that dignity is part of what makes life worth living?[10]

The first step to understanding Mill's endorsement of these claims is figuring out what he means by human nature. In his essay "Nature," Mill identifies an object's nature as

> the ensemble or aggregate of its powers or properties: the modes in which it acts on other things (counting among those things the senses of the observer), and the modes in which other things act on it; to which, in the case of a sentient being, must be added, its own capacities of feeling, or being conscious. (*CW* 10.374)

In other words, Mill identifies an object's nature with what it can do and what can be done to it, that is, with the sum total of its capacities for acting and undergoing.

[10]This claim about *dignity's* importance to happiness should be distinguished from claims about *nobility's* importance to happiness discussed elsewhere (i.e., Mawson 2002; Riley 2013 and 2019; and Devigne 2006a, 2006b, and 2017). I am not directly interested in the importance of actually leading a noble life. I am interested in the importance of bearing a nature which makes leading a noble life possible. This is particularly relevant to distinguishing my approach from that of Riley 2019. Riley also focuses on the first utilitarian challenge, but overlooks this distinction. Thus, he explains Mill's claims about the sense of dignity's importance by appealing to his claims about the pleasure involved in actually leading a noble life (Riley 2019: 200–201).

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A human being's nature, then, is rightly identified with her potential: it is the set of things she might do or be.[11] This squares well with *Utilitarianism*, for Mill presents the dignity of human nature as hinging on humanity's capacities. Thus, when Mill suggests that utilitarianism's critics degrade human nature, he does so on the grounds that "the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable" (*CW* 10.210). Similarly, Mill portrays the sense of dignity as possessed not just by those who actually lead noble lives, but even by those who simply appreciate their capacity to lead such lives. Thus, he emphasizes that there is special value even in the life a person whose dignity comes out primarily in awareness that her life is not as noble as it could be (*CW* 10.212).[12] As Miller 2010 helpfully puts it, the sense of dignity is a pleasure taken in "the mere possession of developed faculties" (61): it hinges on *possessing* such faculties, not expressing them. When Mill speaks about the dignity of human nature, he speaks about the dignity of humanity's potential.

There is, however, a difference between having a potential which is itself dignified and simply having the potential to do things which are dignified. Consider the following: although a grounded bird might have the potential to fly, its potential is not itself flying. Capacities do not always take on the properties of their expressions. When Mill speaks of the dignity of human nature, however, it is clear he means that human nature is itself dignified, not just that its realization might be. The dignity of human nature provides a source of happiness that is independent of other aspects of our nature's realization: our lives are enhanced by awareness that we bear natures which *could* be realized in noble activity even when hostile circumstances render such activity impossible. This makes sense only if there is something valuable about human nature itself, not just the things human nature allows us to do. More needs to be said, then, about how the nobility of the best human life secures the dignity of human nature. It is not clear if seeing human nature as potential nobility is the same as seeing it as itself noble. Nor is it clear whether seeing human nature as noble would be the same as seeing it as dignified.

Mill offers little explicit guidance about the transition between the potential nobility of human life and the dignity of human nature. Nonetheless, I take it that the link will become clear once we see what Mill means by nobility. For Mill, to call something noble is to call it beautiful: nobility is the term Mill uses to track aesthetic value within the realm of human affairs. This equation of the noble and the beautiful is confirmed in Mill's *System of Logic*, where aesthetics is identified as the branch of the Art of Life

[11]A similar point is made in Tulloch 1989: 154. Adams 1992: 441–43 and Corcoran 2019: 481–84 emphasize that Mill also uses the term human nature to refer to the innate tendencies of uneducated human beings. As both accounts make clear, however, the identification of human nature with human potential is what matters for human dignity. Mill views humanity's uneducated tendencies quite poorly. The dignity of human nature, consequently, hinges on humanity's potential extending further than its uneducated instincts suggest.

[12]Riley 2019: 199–200 misconstrues this case in a way that obscures the difference between bearing a dignified nature and living a noble life. Mill claims it is "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (*CW* 10.212). As Riley reads this, Socrates' dissatisfaction stems from desire for the fool's pleasures: Socrates enjoys the pleasures of leading a noble life, but is dissatisfied since leading this life requires sacrificing lesser goods. This is not how Mill describes Socrates' dissatisfaction. Socrates is dissatisfied because he feels himself capable of a nobility he has not yet attained. This sense of his *unrealized* capacity for nobility is, Mill suggests, what makes Socrates' life better than the fool's: Socrates' knowledge of his life's deficiencies "will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify" (*CW* 10.212).

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concerning "the Beautiful or Noble, in human conduct and works" (*CW* 8.949). Further confirmation is found in Mill's discussion of the "aesthetic aspect" of action in his essay on Bentham. Mill suggests that an action's beauty determines whether we judge it "admirable" or "mean" (*CW* 10.112). I take it that the "admirable" Mill speaks of here corresponds to the noble Mill speaks of in other works – "mean" is, after all, the opposing term for both.[13] There is, then, good reason to treat Mill's use of the term noble in *Utilitarianism* as a way of tracking aesthetic value.[14]

There is need for some caution here, as Mill has a highly moralized view of human beauty. Thus, Mill suggests that actions are beautiful only when expressive of a settled virtuous character.[15] If care is taken regarding the limits Mill places on what counts as beautiful in the realm of human affairs, however, we can treat him as equating the beautiful and the noble in this realm. When Mill suggests that the dignity of human nature depends on seeing that nature as the potential to lead a noble life, he suggests that the dignity of human nature depends on seeing that nature as the potential to lead a beautiful life.

The question, then, is whether there is something dignified about the potential to be beautiful. This is easier to get a grip on than whether there is something dignified about the potential to be noble, if only because beautiful is more of a live term for us than noble is. As a first approach at an answer, consider a truly beautiful sculpture, an irreplaceable one-of-a-kind masterpiece.[16] Viewed aesthetically, the world is worth more for containing such a work: its presence within the world makes the world a more beautiful thing than it would otherwise be. From the perspective of someone for whom aesthetic value is a genuine type of value, such a work bears a certain weight. Its claim to be an *irreplaceable* masterwork is borne out, for its significance to the world is such that it truly makes a difference whether or not it is present within it. Let us ask how someone who views a work of art as significant in this way will view a slab of marble, thought of as that work *in potentia*, as something that might become that one-of-a-kind masterpiece. Considered in this way, the marble will itself inherit much of the weight and significance of the sculpture. The marble matters to the world, for it has something special to offer it: namely, the aesthetic value of the sculpture it might become.

The case for expecting a transfer of significance from realization to potential is even stronger where the relation between a beautiful human life and the nature that allows such a life is concerned. Considered at an individual level, the nature that each person bears is not just *a* port by which something of incredible beauty might enter the world.

[13]The charge, recall, was that denying the nobility of our ends renders utilitarianism "utterly mean and groveling."

[14]Anderson 1991, Riley 2013, and Devigne 2017 similarly suggest that Mill sees nobility as the object of particularly aesthetic sentiments.

[15]Contra Heydt 2011, Mill does not consider actions beautiful only when they serve something greater than the agent's own good. The uniting thread in Mill's discussions of human beauty is virtue, not self-transcendence: an act expressing selfless devotion is beautiful, but so is one expressing truly refined prudence. On this point, see Riley 2013: 113 and Devigne 2006b: 99.

[16]The analogy between a beautiful human life and a beautiful work of art is one Mill makes explicit use of in similar contexts elsewhere, e.g., when claiming that "Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself" (*CW* 18.263). It is likewise common among the romantic authors who heavily influenced Mill on these issues. As helpfully described by Thorlby 1973, these authors' ideal was the "shaping of one's own life, as though it were a never-finished work of art" (107), a process understood in terms of the individual "realiz[ing] his inner potential to the full" (101).

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It is the one and only port: any given sculpture might have come out of any number of slabs of marble, but the beautiful life of a particular human being can come about only through the realization of the particular nature she bears. Thus, if the life of a human being can be a masterwork on a par with a great sculpture, enhancing the world by its presence within it in the way that a great sculpture does, then the nature of a human being will bear the weight that properly belongs to the one and only thing capable of becoming such a masterwork. Thought of in this way, human nature seems the proper object of wonder or awe: it bears a special significance in light of its significance to the world. As a result of this significance, human nature seems to deserve a certain respect and consideration. It might, without any violence to the term, be described as having a certain *dignity* that it would otherwise lack.[17]

At this point, it is clear why Mill claims that the dignity of human nature depends on the nobility of the best human life. If even the best human life is ignoble, then human nature will lack the significance that comes with being nobility *in potentia*. What remains to be seen, however, is why Mill treats the suggestion that human nature lacks this dignity as a kind of pessimism: why can we not lead happy lives even without dignified natures? Mill's answer to this question focuses on the essential role the sense of dignity plays in human happiness: human beings, Mill suggests, do not lead truly worthwhile lives unless they are aware of their status as the bearers of dignified natures.

Mill does not provide an explicit statement of what makes this awareness so vital to happiness. A plausible account has, however, been suggested by the preceding discussion. We have seen that when Mill speaks about the dignity of a creature's nature, he speaks of the dignity of her potential. The identity between a creature and the potential she bears is quite close: we can say of the person who has the capacity to lead a noble life that she *is* such a noble life *in potentia*. Thus, if the potential to lead a noble life is dignified, the one who bears that potential is dignified as well. An individual's sense of dignity amounts to awareness of herself as possessing the special significance that belongs to something capable of adding beauty to the world in a way that increases its worth. For an individual to see herself this way will be to see herself as entitled to a certain respect in light of her global significance. To possess a sense of dignity, then, is to have a certain respect for oneself, a respect that derives from one's status as a source of globally significant aesthetic value. Mill makes this connection between dignity and self-respect explicit in *On Liberty*, where the two terms are used almost interchangeably: the choice of a base life expresses "want of personal dignity and self-respect" (*CW* 18.279). Likewise, in *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill praises socialized labor for cultivating "a sense of personal worth and dignity" (*CW* 3.781), treating the sense of dignity as equivalent to a sense of one's worth.[18]

The importance of this self-respect is, I take it, what underlies Mill's claim that happiness cannot be had without a sense of dignity. There are different glosses we might give of aesthetic self-respect's importance, each of which suggests a different reckoning of how much losing it would cost us. The lowest-stakes reading simply focuses on Mill's claim that self-respect's intrinsic value makes it a large part of happiness. The sense of dignity is a particularly high-quality pleasure: it constitutes such a large part of life's

[17]This account fits well with Moshe Halbertal's observation that denying someone's gift is a way of denying her dignity (Halbertal 2015). To tell someone she has nothing significant to offer is a way of saying she herself lacks significance.

[18]Hauskeller 2011: 443 similarly takes Mill to treat the sense of dignity as a sense of one's worth. Contra Hauskeller, however, I argue that Mill is well positioned to explain this self-worth's importance.

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value that the portion of the human good left over after its loss would fall far short of what the idea of happiness leads us to expect.[19] Were the intrinsic value of self-respect all that denying the best human life's nobility cost us, however, the pessimistic force of that denial would be relatively mild. This is clearly weak pessimism: it suggests that life is less valuable than we might have hoped but not that it is not valuable at all. The affective and motivational consequences of such a claim might be quite limited: knowing that life offers less benefit than you hoped might be significantly discouraging, but it would not promote loss of interest in those benefits that might still be obtained.

Mill does not, however, see the loss of self-respect's intrinsic value as the only element of this claim's pessimistic force. Mill also suggests that this kind of self-respect is crucial to enabling those with highly developed aesthetic sensibilities to take their lives seriously. For those to whom aesthetic value is a matter of importance, to view human life as aesthetically irrelevant is to view themselves with a certain contempt, as deeply insignificant from within their own value perspective. Such self-contempt, in painting the individual as beneath notice, also suggests that her life is not worth leading: the good of a trivial, insignificant thing is itself trivial and insignificant. Thus, in *A System of Logic*, Mill defends the pursuit of nobility on the grounds that it

> would go further than all things else towards making human life happy; both in the comparatively humble sense, of pleasure and freedom from pain, and in the higher meaning, of rendering life, not what it now is almost universally, puerile and insignificant – but such as human beings with highly developed faculties can care to have. (*CW* 8.952)

The situation is even worse for an aesthetically sensitive individual who accepts the full force of the critics' charge, holding that human life not only fails to add aesthetic value to the world but in fact diminishes its aesthetic worth. For the aesthetically sensitive person who accepts that even the best human life will be positively base – a "mean and groveling" existence standing as a disfiguring blot upon the earth – what follows is something closer to self-disgust than self-contempt.[20] She figures herself as low not in a way that makes her irrelevant to the world, but in a way that makes her presence within the world a corruption of it. For such a person, the vision of the self as ignoble leaves life not just trivialized but condemned.

Here we have a sense in which denying the best human life's nobility seems to approach strong pessimism: for the person of highly developed aesthetic sensitivities, taking even the best human life to lack aesthetic value suggests that human life is either too trivial to bother with or too ugly to tolerate. The situation is complicated, however, as these stark consequences only follow for those both highly sensitive to and highly

[19]That Mill sees the sense of dignity as an incomparably large part of happiness is indicated by his suggestion that its value *explains* the dignified person's unwillingness to exchange any of her higher capacities for full satisfaction of her lower ones (*CW* 10.212, discussed briefly in Devigne 2006b: 79). The intrinsic value of the other higher pleasures is not enough to justify this choice unless the sense of dignity is appealed to. This suggests that the sense of dignity constitutes a part of happiness larger not only than that constituted by the combined value of all lower pleasures but than that constituted by the value of any single one of the other higher pleasures as well.

[20]I take it that the proper object of contempt is something seen as insignificant and beneath notice (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.2, 1378b10–16), while the proper object of disgust is something that actively degrades the world around it (Miller 1997: 8; Rozin et al. 1999: 433). The contemptible is base, while the disgusting is both base and base-making.

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concerned about aesthetic value, not for people in general. Those who lack significant sensitivity to aesthetic value or put little stock in aesthetic modes of valuation will not experience life as not worth living just because it lacks aesthetic significance. As such, this may not seem a genuine form of pessimism at all let alone a form of strong pessimism: it is not a form of pessimism to say that happiness cannot be had by those who *avoidably* cultivate attachment to excessively demanding value perspectives. Such a claim would suggest not that life is worth less to us than the concept of happiness suggests, but that attaining the happiness which life makes available requires exercising caution about our valuational commitments.

Mill, however, has an answer to this objection. Although the problems considered above affect only a particular subset of human beings, Mill's larger account of happiness suggests that fully happy lives are available only to those within that subset.[21] The exercise of our aesthetic capacities is, on Mill's account, a large part of the human good. Thus, if attachment to aesthetic values necessarily decreases attachment to human life, the pursuit of happiness would be self-defeating: committed pursuit of that portion of the good still available to us would result in a loss of interest in obtaining even that portion. Here it is not just the sense of dignity itself that is lost but aesthetic appreciation in general. If human life is ignoble, there is no room in it not just for dignity but also for the exercise of all those aesthetic capacities the cultivation of which would cause us to experience dignity's absence as a serious loss. The question of whether this is strong pessimism or simply a stark form of weak pessimism hinges on whether a life in which aesthetic appreciation played no role would still be worth living. This is a question Mill seems to answer negatively in other work.[22]

If a sense of dignity could not be found in even the best human life, life would be worth much less than expected for all of us and be barely of interest to others. Mill's discussion of the claim that the pleasure desirer's best life cannot be noble, then, seems to validate treating that claim as a pessimistic challenge. Mill has good reason to think that the possibility of happiness depends on the particularly aesthetic potential of human life.[23]

III. The second challenge: life as noble but unsatisfying

After responding to this first challenge, Mill turns his attention to a second. Interestingly, however, this challenge inverts the claim that constituted the first. Above, Mill confronted the charge that the pleasure desirer's best life would be satisfying but ignoble. Here, he confronts the charge that this life would be noble but unsatisfying. In what follows, I explain why Mill treats this charge as no less genuine a pessimistic challenge than its opposite.

[21]This worry brings Mill close to Nietzsche. Both think real happiness belongs only to the aesthetically sensitive, and thus treat problems facing this subset of people as challenges to the possibility of human happiness. Mill's concern does not involve the same elitism as Nietzsche's, however: he considers all people *capable* of developing the aesthetic sensitivity that makes these problems relevant. For discussion of Mill's and Nietzsche's different approaches to this shared concern, see Miller 2010: 66–68 and Leiter 2018: 167–69 respectively.

[22]This is Mill's position in the *Autobiography*. Working through that account would take us far afield, however, so I leave both interpretative options on the table for now.

[23]Note that accepting Mill's claims about the importance of the best human life's beauty does not entail accepting his claims about that beauty's source. The above might be accepted while rejecting Mill's division between noble higher and base lower faculties, his equation of human beauty with virtue, etc.

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That Mill understands the second challenge as a pessimistic challenge is clear. His discussion begins by identifying his opponents as pessimists who nonetheless endorse the possibility of human nobility. Thus, Mill notes that utilitarianism is opposed by

> another class of objectors, who say that happiness, in any form, cannot be the rational purpose of human life and action; because, in the first place, it is unattainable: and they contemptuously ask, What right hast thou to be happy? A question which Mr. Carlyle clenches by the addition, What right, a short time ago, hadst thou even *to be*? Next, they say, that men can do without happiness; that all noble human beings have felt this, and could not have become noble but by learning the lesson of *Entsagen*, or renunciation; which lesson, thoroughly learnt and submitted to, they affirm to be the beginning and necessary condition of all virtue. (*CW* 10.214)

I consider this passage in detail below. For the moment, however, it suffices to note two things. The charge is clearly pessimistic in nature: the critics explicitly deny the possibility of human happiness. It is also clearly distinct from the previous charge: the critics affirm the possibility of nobility, but suggest it is only available after happiness is renounced. Although these claims are both put positively – happiness really is impossible, nobility really is available through renunciation – they should be heard in the *ad hominem* context of *Utilitarianism*'s second chapter. These critics may well endorse the claims put forward. What matters, however, is not that they endorse them, but that they take them to be entailed by claims utilitarianism endorses: these critics too take their charge to follow from utilitarianism's theory of life.

Mill initially states this charge as a generic pessimistic claim: the objectors deny the possibility of happiness directly, rather than identifying a specific flaw in life. However, his later glosses of the charge and his strategy for responding to it suggest he has something more specific in mind: these critics deny life's ability to *satisfy*. Thus, Mill later restates the charge as a doubt "whether human beings, if taught to consider [pleasure] as the end of life, would be satisfied with such a moderate share of it" (*CW* 10.215).[24] On this statement, the charge seems to be that utilitarianism's theory of life constitutes pessimism because life will never offer enough pleasure to satisfy a creature who desires only pleasure. Mill's response is tailored to this understanding of the charge. He argues that people can be satisfied by less pleasure than the critics think, and that human life can easily contain more pleasure than is typical at present. As became clear above, Mill denies any direct identity between happiness and contentment. Thus, Mill's efforts are best understood as countering a specific variety of pessimism: namely, that which denies the best human life's ability to satisfy.

The claim that even the best human life is insufficiently satisfying might be heard in three ways. One might say that life fails to satisfy if it fails to include any genuinely

[24]To avoid confusion, I have replaced Mill's use of the word happiness with the word pleasure. Mill uses the term happiness inconsistently: it sometimes refers to pleasure directly and sometimes refers to a life worth living. In the critics' charge, happiness refers to a life worth living. Thus, Mill counters by describing a *life* available to the pleasure-desirer: "A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness" (*CW* 10.215). In the modified quote, however, Mill must equate happiness with pleasure directly. Otherwise, the worry expressed is incompatible with the critics' charge: the critics cannot claim both that happiness is *impossible*, and that we possess an unsatisfactorily small amount of it.

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desirable good. On this understanding, talk about life's ability to satisfy is a proxy for talk about its completeness. A life which is unsatisfying in this sense may frequently satisfy the actual desires of the one leading it. It may, in fact, satisfy every desire she actually has, leaving her perfectly content from a psychological point of view. What matters from this perspective is not actual desires but hypothetical ones: a life is unsatisfying just in case there exists some good which the life does not contain, and which the person leading the life *would* desire if she became properly aware of it.

On another understanding, that life fails to satisfy might mean that we will always possess at least one unsatisfied desire. Here again, life may be unsatisfying even if it satisfies many desires. What matters is the one unsatisfied desire left over, regardless of how many others were fulfilled. This perspective on satisfaction differs from the previous in focusing on actual desires. However, it shares the previous perspective's focus on completeness: on both understandings, life is satisfying only if it satisfies *all* of an agent's desires. The only point of contention is whether desires the agent could hypothetically be brought to have ought to be counted in the assessment.

On a final option, that life fails to satisfy might mean that it offers insufficient experience of desire satisfaction. On this understanding, desire-satisfaction is itself important, rather than mattering only insofar as it removes the disvalued state of unsatisfied desire. It follows that this understanding need not share the previous two understandings' focus on the complete and final satisfaction of all desire. What matters is the *extent* of opportunities for desire-satisfaction, and this will not reliably track the reduction of unsatisfied desire. Thus, a distinctive feature of this view is that it suggests life might be unsatisfying because it failed to *inspire* desire. An individual who possesses but one weak desire may easily attain complete and final satisfaction. Likewise, even if an individual's life contains only paltry goods, it will qualify as complete if those goods are the only ones conceivable. On the previous two understandings, then, life might be satisfying while still allowing few opportunities for the actual experience of desire satisfaction. They focus on whether or not the individual's (real or hypothetical) desires are fully satisfied, but are not concerned with whether those desires are sufficiently extensive to make their satisfaction notable. On the present understanding, in contrast, a life's satisfying quality depends on the extent of the opportunities for satisfaction it allows. This will be a product of *both* the extent of the desires it provokes and the frequency with which those desires are fulfilled.

This third understanding of the claim that life cannot satisfy must be what Mill has in mind. He is explicitly interested in questions about whether life provides enough to desire. Thus, he worries that selfish interests diminish with age, a concern he counters by pointing to the possibility of developing desires focused on things other than oneself (*CW* 10.215). Such a reduction of desire is a threat to life's capacity to satisfy only on the third understanding of what this capacity entails. The second group of critics, then, claim that insufficient instances of desire satisfaction would be found in the pleasure desirer's best life. What remains is to explain why Mill treats this claim as a pessimistic challenge: given that Mill does not identify happiness with contentment, why does he grant that a life which offered few instances of desire satisfaction would be an unhappy one?

In answering this question, it will help to look more closely at the assemblage of claims Mill associates with the challenge. The critics claim: (1) that even the best human life is unsatisfying; (2) that individuals have no right to be happy or even exist; and (3) that true nobility is possible only when happiness is renounced. I take it that Mill sees these claims as united by a shared effect: namely, a reduction of the

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individual's interest in her own life. An individual whose life testifies to the truth of the first claim will, Mill suspects, undergo a naturalized version of the renunciation enjoined by the other two. She will lose interest in her life for psychological rather than moral reasons. The critics claim that we have no hope of retaining an interest in ourselves, but suggest this is a fortunate circumstance: true nobility begins only after interest in one's life comes to an end.[25] Further support for this interpretation of the threat insufficient satisfaction poses is found in Mill's characterization of his solutions to it. Thus, responding to the claim that life becomes less satisfying over time, Mill counters that those with sympathetic concerns and intellectual passions "retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigor of youth" and find "sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds [them]" (*CW* 10.215–16). This counter is relevant because Mill's worry is that when life ceases to satisfy it ceases to *engage*.

Mill has good reason to connect a failure of engagement with insufficient satisfaction. On Mill's understanding of the claim that life cannot satisfy, a life which offers insufficient satisfaction is one which offers insufficient opportunity for the fulfillment of desire. Life may fail an individual in this respect for either of two reasons: it may offer too little to desire, or it may allow the satisfaction of desire with insufficient frequency. In either case, the failure will leave the individual with little basis for engagement with her own life. The one who finds little in life to desire expects nothing of it right from the start: she has no interest in her life, for it seems to have nothing to offer her. The one whose desires are never satisfied soon works her way around to the same position: the things that interest her have no place within her life, and her interest in them thus creates no interest in it. This is a version of what Reginster 2006 calls the problem of inspiration. The interest we take in our lives depends on our interest in the ends we hope to realize or enjoy within those lives. Taking an interest in our lives thus requires us to have ends which we see as both valuable and potentially realizable within our life (24–25). For the person who finds nothing to desire, no end appears valuable. For the person whose desires are never met, no end appears realizable. In either case, an end which is both realizable and worthy of realization is absent. Thus, in either case, there is nothing to inspire engagement with one's life.

As Mill sees it, there are two possible results of such disengagement. The individual may simply give up on life, lacking motive to maintain an existence from which nothing is expected (*CW* 10.214). Alternatively, an individual sufficiently swayed by the moralizing arguments for renunciation considered above might stick around, dutifully passing her life in noble displays of self-sacrifice despite finding no satisfaction in doing so. This second option does not solve the problem, however. For Mill suggests that the reason for living provided by such dutiful nobility and self-sacrifice is flawed in a way that renders it unsustainable. A sacrifice must be carried out for the sake of something or someone. This is what distinguishes it from mere imprudence. There is nothing

[25]Carlyle defends the *Entsagen* view in these terms. Finding happiness impossible, we lose interest in ourselves and take interest in our work. Thus, he encourages renouncing interest in our own lives by noting that the rewards of such interest never satisfy: "Thou wilt never sell thy Life, or any part of thy Life, in a satisfactory manner. Give it, like a royal heart; let the price be *Nothing*: thou hast then, in a certain sense got All for it!" (Carlyle 1843: 175). In replacing interest in our lives with interest in our work, we do not simply find a new object of desire. Rather, although our *desires* remain focused on pleasure, desire ceases to be our only motive. We stop being automatons moved *by* our desires and become free, self-moving agents. Thus, Carlyle presents desire-based motivational theories as fundamentally impoverished and degrading: "of Volition except as the synonym of Desire, we hear nothing; of 'Motives,' without any Mover, more than enough" (Carlyle 1831: 358).

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beautiful or noble about profligacy: it is the fact that the individual's good is relinquished for the sake of some valuable end that marks action off as sacrifice rather than squandering (*CW* 10.217–18). From the perspective of someone who sees no hope for satisfaction, however, there are no valuable ends sacrifice might serve. As Mill clearly indicates, unselfish desires are no less desires for their unselfishness. Thus, the person who finds no satisfaction in life can have no realizable unselfish desires either. Those unselfish ends that strike her as worthy of realization must be unrealizable, while those unselfish ends which are realizable must strike her as unworthy of realization. The person whose life offers no opportunity for satisfaction cannot engage in noble self-sacrifice: just as she cannot live for herself, neither can she truly live for anything else.[26] The claim that even the best human life cannot satisfy, then, seems to possess dire pessimistic force, leaving individuals without any stable motive to continue living.

IV. Understanding pessimism

At the article's start, I quoted the pessimistic fear that plagued Mill during his crisis: namely, the worry that there might be "a flaw in life itself." As our discussion has shown, however, pessimism does not rest on attributing any single flaw to life. There are multiple, sometimes quite opposed, flaws which might undermine life's value. Thus, Mill had good reason to treat two inverted claims about life's defects as bearing legitimate pessimistic force: happiness is equally outside our reach whether the best human life is satisfying but ignoble or noble but unsatisfying. Our discussion of Mill, then, has shown that pessimism is a plural concept. There will be many distinct pessimisms, each deriving its force from the attribution of a distinct flaw to the best possible human life. Mill helped us understand two such pessimisms, but many others remain unexamined.

More needs to be said about this effort's significance. What do we gain from understanding pessimisms like these? The straightforward answer is that pessimism must be understood to be assessed. The significance of assessing pessimistic charges is not, however, something this article emphasized. I bracketed questions about the accuracy of the pessimistic challenges under consideration, focusing instead on understanding what makes them pessimistic challenges in the first place. Thus, I attempted to bring out Mill's reasons for accepting the pessimistic force of the two charges, but gave little attention to his reasons for thinking that both misrepresent the pleasure-desirer's best life. It is my hope that this way of proceeding brought out an answer to the question "Why

[26]It may be worth distinguishing Mill's critique from a similar argument of Bentham's. Like Mill, Bentham finds asceticism's elevation of self-sacrifice inconsistent (*IPML*, 11–13). The ascetic claims that pleasure is harmful and pain beneficial. This suggests that benefitting another requires causing her pain. The ascetic, however, also considers intentionally causing another pain immoral. This renders her calls to self-sacrifice incoherent: if morality requires sacrifice for the benefit of others, then morality requires doing wrong. Mill points to a different inconsistency. The ascetic claims that ends we deem worthy of realization cannot be realized. Sacrifice, however, must be directed at realizing worthy ends. In recommending self-sacrifice, then, the ascetic recommends a kind of action she should consider impossible. The key difference is that Mill takes asceticism to hinge on a descriptive pessimistic premise while Bentham does not. Bentham thought asceticism originated in hope and fear: earthly happiness is renounced to win honor and avert divine punishment (*IPML*, 9). Mill, in contrast, thought asceticism originated in despair: earthly happiness is renounced because it cannot be obtained (see, e.g., his suggestion at *CW* 27.666 that increased availability of happiness inevitably breaks asceticism's appeal). Mill and Bentham understand asceticism's grounds differently, and thus take different approaches to its critique.

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study pessimism?" that differs from the straightforward answer that pessimism must be understood to be assessed. For I take the preceding discussion to have shown that simply understanding why a particular pessimistic claim qualifies as a pessimistic claim is enough to teach us something important about the nature of a happy life.

Each pessimistic claim suggests the best human life is flawed in some specific respect. Each also presents itself as posing a specific threat to the possibility of happiness. To understand a pessimistic claim *as* a pessimistic claim will be to grasp the link between the flaw it attributes to the best human life and the threat to happiness it poses. Thus, we understood the pessimistic force of the denial of the best human life's nobility when we grasped the link between this denial and the loss of self-respect, and we understood the pessimistic force of the denial of the best human life's capacity to satisfy when we grasped the link between this denial and the loss of interest in one's life. To grasp this link is to see why a life cannot be called happy if it possesses the flaw attributed to it by the variety of pessimism under consideration.

It is thus fortunate that the history of philosophy has made a good number of interesting pessimistic claims available to us. We may think that many of these claims are ultimately false, condemning life on the basis of flaws it need not possess. Nonetheless, there is still much to learn from them. For we have seen that our knowledge of the things that make human life worth living is enhanced by understanding the flaws that *would* condemn it, regardless of whether or not any actually do.[27]

Competing Interests

The author declares none.

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