*Utilitas* (2026), **38**, 203–218
doi:10.1017/S0953820826100363

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLES

# Mill's Aesthetic Action: A Reconceptualization as World-Regarding Action

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(Received 21 July 2025; revised 4 January 2026; accepted 24 April 2026; first published online 23 June 2026)

**Abstract**

This paper reconceptualizes aesthetic action in John Stuart Mill's *art of life* as a distinct, *world-regarding action*, oriented toward ideals such as justice, beauty, and nobility. While morality is guided by obligations to others and prudence by rationality and the cultivation of virtues, aesthetics concerns the aspirational pursuit of collective human flourishing. Rejecting character-based interpretations, the paper distinguishes aesthetic action by its transformative effect and expressive quality. Though not enforceable, aesthetic ideals expand moral imagination and inspire long-term social progress. Drawing on Mill's separation between action and character evaluation, the argument clarifies that aesthetic action cannot be reduced to virtue or character. Instead, it completes Mill's tripartite normative framework by illuminating a third domain that motivates ethical life through nobleness and imagination. Aesthetic action thus becomes essential to understanding Mill's perfectionist aspiration and his vision of higher happiness.

**Keywords:** J.S. Mill; art of life; aesthetic action; virtue; world-regarding action

## 1 Introduction

In the third edition of *A System of Logic*, John Stuart Mill articulates his ethical vision through the *art of life* framework, dividing human action into three domains: morality (right), prudence (expediency or policy), and aesthetics (beautiful or noble) (CW8.949).[1] The domain of aesthetics is where the distinctive features of Mill's utilitarianism most clearly emerge, associated with terms such as the beautiful, the noble, worthiness, and taste. By proposing that "the character itself should be, to the individual, a paramount end," and that the ideal nobility of character "would go farther than all things else

[1]All references to Mill's works are from *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 vols, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–91), hereafter cited in the text as CW with volume and page numbers.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820826100363 Published online by Cambridge University Press

toward making human life happy" (CW8.952), Mill has led many scholars to interpret aesthetics as fundamentally concerned with character development.

Dominant interpretations link Mill's aesthetics to Aristotelian excellence (Brown 2017; Gray 1996), Platonic and Socratic ideals (Loizides 2013), the cultivation of imagination and emotion through aesthetic education (Heydt 2006), the synthesis of ancient and romantic thought (Devigne 2006; Riley 2013), supererogation (Riley 2011, 2019), and the appreciation of art and natural beauty. Despite their differences, these readings share a common focus on the formative role of character in Mill's account of the aesthetic.

While these approaches have contributed to a richer understanding of Mill's domain of aesthetics, a character-centered interpretation raises fundamental questions about the very nature of aesthetic action. If the domain of aesthetics is defined by noble character, does it then follow that any action performed by a person of noble character is aesthetic by that reason alone? Since aesthetic feeling is closely tied to the cultivation of character, should experiences such as the appreciation of natural beauty or the reception of aesthetic education – experiences that elevate one's character – be considered aesthetic actions in and of themselves? These questions suggest that the relationships among character, aesthetic experience, and aesthetic action are more complex than they initially seem. My concern is that these character-centered approaches, despite their contributions, do not fully clarify what qualifies as aesthetic action.

The inadequacy of character-centered approaches becomes evident when one recognizes that they conflate two distinct evaluative frameworks. While character-centered interpretations offer valuable insights into the role of virtue and supererogation, they risk obscuring one of Mill's most fundamental distinctions: the rigorous separation between character evaluation and action evaluation (CW10.221). When aesthetic evaluation is reduced to virtue assessment, the distinctive features of Mill's tripartite framework become unclear, and the specific role of aesthetic action within the art of life remains undefined.

This study offers a new interpretation of aesthetic action within Mill's art of life. Unlike previous interpretations that anchor it in noble character or individual virtue, I argue that aesthetic action should be understood as *world-regarding conduct* whose normative orientation reaches beyond mere expediency or interpersonal obligation toward broader social, national, or civilizational ideals. On this view, aesthetic action is defined by what the agent *does* – specifically, the kind of action that expresses and realizes shared human aspirations.

Prudence and morality each reflect distinct normative orientations: prudential guidance is self-regarding, concerned with managing one's own life wisely over time; moral guidance is other-regarding, directed toward enforceable duties to others. Aesthetic action, by contrast, is world-regarding in scope. It seeks to elevate human potential not through coercion or codified duty, but through the inspirational pursuit of ideals such as justice, beauty, or dignity – ideals whose reach transcends the needs of the individual or the claims of specific others.

By foregrounding this domain as independent of, yet mutually reinforcing with, the moral and prudential domains, I argue that Mill's tripartite structure – self-, other-, and world-regarding domains – offers a more coherent model for understanding aesthetic action than character-centered approaches. Unlike interpretations that locate noble character within the aesthetic domain, thereby obscuring the boundary between self-development (prudence) and aesthetics, this framework preserves the logical

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independence of each domain by situating character development within prudence and reserving aesthetics for the expression of these capacities in public-spirited action.

Section 2 addresses the ambiguity in traditional character-based interpretations by clarifying Mill's tripartite framework and analyzing his portrayals of noble figures. It argues that the ethical value of these figures lies not in their virtue alone, but in the nature of their public-facing actions. Section 3 turns to the question of self-sacrifice, showing that, in Mill's view, acts of aesthetic nobility – though not morally obligatory – can realize the highest form of happiness through voluntary alignment with universal ideals. Section 4 explores the psychological basis of aesthetic action, especially Mill's account of sympathy and imagination, to explain how individuals internalize concern for collective well-being without collapsing the self-other distinction. Section 5 considers Mill's nuanced theory of duty and sanction across the three domains, demonstrating how aesthetic and prudential ideals can exert motivating force without being coercively enforceable. Section 6 brings these analyses together by comparing morality, prudence, and aesthetics at the level of domain, guidance, action, and evaluation. Through this comparison, the paper clarifies the independence and dynamic interdependence of the three domains in Mill's ethical system, and affirms the centrality of aesthetic action to the art of life as a whole.

## 2 Defining aesthetic action: from character to world-regarding conduct

### *2.1 The tripartite framework*

In the third edition of *A System of Logic* (1851), Mill presents the art of life as a framework of practical reason that aims at the greatest happiness as its ultimate end. He divides human action into three distinct "departments" – morality, prudence, and aesthetics – a distinction maintained through the eighth edition (CW8.949–50). Yet the origins of this tripartite structure and its actual meaning remain unclear.

Mill's earliest tripartite formulation appears in *Bentham* (1838), where his conceptualization differs from his later works. In this essay, he presents the framework as three evaluative perspectives applicable to any single action. He writes: "Every human action has three aspects: its *moral* aspect, or that of its *right* and *wrong*; its *aesthetic* aspect, or that of its *beauty*; its *sympathetic* aspect, or that of its *loveableness*" (CW10.112). He illustrates this with Brutus sentencing his sons to death – morally right and admirable for its rare patriotism, yet not loveable – while brotherly affection is loveable, though neither moral nor admirable (CW10.112).

However, Mill's later writings reframe the tripartite division as a framework for organizing actions according to distinct governing principles. In *A System of Logic*, he articulates this framework as three distinct "departments" of action – morality, prudence, and aesthetics – replacing the earlier sympathetic aspect with prudence (CW8.949). In *Utilitarianism* (1861), he designates these three domains as three "provinces": morality, expediency, and worthiness, maintaining the same structural distinction as in *A System of Logic*. This raises an interpretive question: Does Mill's tripartite division present three evaluative perspectives applicable to any action, or does it classify actions into distinct domains governed by separate principles?

Although Mill does not explicitly address this shift in terminology, *Utilitarianism* furnishes the key to understanding the apparent inconsistency. First, by anchoring morality in duty – construed as action subject to coercion and punishment (CW10.246) – Mill establishes the conceptual boundaries that separate the moral

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domain from the non-moral domains of expediency and worthiness. As Loizides rightly observes (2013, 139), this demarcation operates not as a matter of degree but as a difference of *type*. Accordingly, these three domains operate according to their own distinct principles and secondary rules, thereby organizing actions through the specific normative logic governing each domain (Donner and Fumerton 2009, 36–45; Fletcher 2017, 301–04; Jacobson 2008, 183–89; Loizides 2013, 79; Miller 2011, 102–03).

Classifying actions by the principles that constitute them and evaluating the same action through multiple evaluative lenses are logically compatible operations. An action may be classified as a moral action while simultaneously being evaluated from aesthetic and prudential standpoints, and the boundaries between these perspectives may prove ambiguous in particular cases. Nevertheless, Mill's framework preserves paradigmatic instances of each domain – exemplary cases that illuminate the structure of his ethical system.

Second, *Utilitarianism* clarifies why sympathy ceases to appear as an independent category in the later tripartite division. Mill's observation that we attend to "the other beauties of character which go towards making a human being loveable or admirable" (CW10.221) reveals that sympathy has become absorbed into the aesthetic domain. Rather than treating aesthetic and sympathy as independent evaluative criteria, Mill weaves them together as interlocking dimensions.

This pattern remains consistent throughout Mill's entire corpus. In *Bentham*, the aesthetic and sympathetic aspects of conduct "depend on the qualities which it is evidence of" (CW10.112). In *A System of Logic*, Mill posits "the cultivation of an ideal nobleness of will and conduct" as the paramount end for each individual (CW8.952). Across these works, aesthetic evaluation depends on qualities of character – a consistency that has led many scholars to conclude that the aesthetic domain amounts to virtue, the expression of noble character.

Granted, Mill's aesthetic domain is bound up with questions of noble character. However, Mill's distinction between character and action suggests that aesthetics cannot be reduced to mere character. Character pertains to the person, not the deed. This demands that we articulate what constitutes aesthetic action independently of the virtuous character it may express.

### 2.2 Mill's hall of noble figures

Mill's conception of aesthetic action is vividly illustrated through his analysis of historical figures he regards as exemplars of nobility. These individuals – from ancient philosophers to contemporary reformers – embody actions that transcend conventional moral or prudential calculation, revealing the distinctive character of aesthetic action in Mill's framework.

Mill describes Socrates as a "philosophical hero" (CW11.416) and an "ideal model of excellence" (CW1.49). Jesus appears as a "moral reformer" (CW10.488), whose teachings represent "the noblest, most enduring, and most universal lessons" (CW11.417). Marcus Aurelius is characterized as a "chosen professional inculcator and guardian of virtue" (CW11.397). Mill's praise extends to contemporaries including the French liberal reformers Turgot and Condorcet, who worked to alleviate economic inequality and abolish slavery and were regarded by Mill as among the "wisest and noblest men" (CW1.115). Similarly, Howard, who led prison reform, and Washington, who declined the opportunity for re-election and established democratic foundations,

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are esteemed as noble figures (CW10.422). Brown, the fervent abolitionist, is described as a "voluntary martyr" and a "true hero" (CW1.266).

Although exemplary figures embody admirable virtues, their noble character alone does not suffice to define what constitutes a noble or aesthetic action. Virtue describes the agent's character – what kind of person they are – rather than their specific actions. Mill explicitly maintains this separation between character and action evaluation. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill states that "the best proof of a good character is good actions"; however, he also observes that "right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blameable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise" (CW10.221). A "person of confirmed virtue" may act from habitual purposes – "often desire it only because we will it" (CW10.248) – yet virtuous character does not guarantee noble action.

Conversely, Mill's analysis of North American Indians facing execution illustrates this principle: though they were "not otherwise distinguished by moral excellence," he nevertheless discerns in them a firmness akin to that animated by the "divine enthusiasm – a self-forgetting devotion to an idea: a state of exalted feeling" characteristic of confessors and martyrs, demonstrating that aesthetic action can emerge independently of virtuous character (CW10.415).

Therefore, the question is not simply what these figures are like, but what they do: What features distinguish noble actions from merely moral or prudent acts? Foregrounding the distinction between character and action allows for a more precise analysis of what makes an action "noble" in Mill's sense. Although the agent's character matters, noble action is defined primarily by the type of action performed. This approach clarifies aesthetic action as a distinct domain within Mill's art of life, rather than simply an outgrowth of virtue ethics.

Exemplary actions are defined by their pursuit of the public good beyond personal interest, producing lasting benefits for society. Aesthetic action is distinguished by its capacity to advance humanity's flourishing through social transformation, intellectual progress, or moral inspiration. Mill observes that noble character "makes other people happier, and the world in general immensely a gainer by it" (CW10.213). Noble acts take many forms – from social reforms like the abolition of slavery to philosophical endeavors such as Socrates' pursuit of truth – but all share the common aim of promoting the greater good. The transformative power of such actions is evident in concrete historical examples. The teachings of Socrates, Jesus, and Marcus Aurelius have shaped moral and intellectual discourse across centuries and continue to enlighten people long after their lifetimes. Likewise, John Brown's abolitionism and George Washington's democratic leadership inspired movements that transcended their specific historical contexts, fundamentally expanding the boundaries of social possibility (CW10.420). The civilizational progress we inherit today – including the refinement of social institutions – reflects the cumulative power of such noble actions across diverse domains of human life.[2]

The aesthetic aspect can also be found in Mill's activities, such as attempting social reform, improving political systems and working environments, and criticizing social customs that support racism, sexism, domestic violence, and child abuse (CW10.258–59; see also Donner and Fumerton 2009, 53–54; Loizides 2013, 81). Mill's advocacy for

[2]I do not claim that aesthetic actions invariably succeed in affecting many people. Rather, what defines aesthetic action is its world-regarding orientation – a fundamental directedness toward effects beyond the agent's private interest – regardless of whether such effects materialize.

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women's suffrage and access to education, as articulated in *The Subjection of Women*, demonstrates that such reforms yield not only "unspeakable benefits in private happiness to the liberated half of humanity" (CW21.299–302, 336) but also substantially enhance society's overall capacity. By enabling women to participate fully in social, intellectual, and civic life, these measures elevate the intellectual resources, moral standards, and collective capabilities of society – allowing talented individuals to become innovators serving the public good (Devigne 2006, 217).

Mill recognizes that these extraordinary examples may seem to set an unrealistically high standard for ordinary individuals. However, he stresses that while not everyone is obligated to become a large-scale public benefactor, "people whose influence extends to society in general" should remain committed to public utility (CW10.220), acknowledging that opportunities and circumstances do not always allow for such actions. Rather than promoting hero-worship, Mill advocates expressing gratitude to those who perform noble actions (CW18.269), while maintaining that aesthetic action should not be limited to extraordinary figures.

Even for ordinary people, cultivating noble aims and the character traits that support them is not only possible but essential to leading an ethically meaningful life. Despite "a lack of time and of opportunity" (CW21.257), Mill argues that "noble aims, once established in the mind, keep our higher faculties active and make us see our skills and knowledge as resources to improve humanity and make the world more rational and sensible" (CW21.256). In his speech honoring abolitionist publisher William Lloyd Garrison, Mill exhorts: "Aim at something great; aim at things which are difficult; and there is no great thing which is not difficult" (CW28.202).

The cultivation of noble aims is thus not a privilege reserved for the few, but a practical and motivating ethical ideal for all. In everyday life, aesthetic action may be expressed in the interest and initiative individuals show in causes such as world hunger, healthcare, environmental protection, and animal welfare – domains where private concern aligns with collective betterment.

In sum, although noble persons matter, the heart of aesthetic action lies in what is done and why. Distinguishing between virtue and action clarifies the distinctive role of aesthetic conduct within Mill's art of life.

### 2.3 Conceptualizing aesthetic action: beyond the self/other-regarding dichotomy

How, then, should noble action be characterized? A common method for understanding conduct in Mill's ethical theory is to distinguish between self-regarding actions (which primarily affect the agent) and other-regarding actions (which primarily affect others). In *On Liberty*, Mill famously uses this binary distinction to establish the proper scope of social authority and determine when interference with individual liberty is permissible (CW18.225). However, two key questions arise. First, can this binary distinction adequately capture the nature of noble action? Second, is it appropriate to apply this distinction to Mill's broader tripartite framework?

Tension arises when we attempt to locate aesthetic action within the binary model. Moral actions are clearly other-regarding – they involve duties to others and may be coercively enforced. However, aesthetic actions, especially those exemplified by Socrates, Jesus, or John Brown, also significantly affect others. If aesthetic action is simply classified as other-regarding, the boundary between morality and aesthetics begins to dissolve because morality itself risks appearing as a specialized subset of the aesthetic domain. That is, within

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Mill's tripartite system, morality may be better understood as a narrow, obligatory dimension within the broader domain of aesthetics. This raises an important question: if both forms of action affect others, why is only morality subject to coercive enforcement, while aesthetic action – no less impactful – aims to inspire rather than to compel?

Alternatively, if aesthetic action is considered self-regarding – grounded in the cultivation of noble character – it begins to resemble prudence, which also concerns inner self-development. In this case, aesthetics loses its distinctiveness. Thus, applying the binary model to Mill's tripartite structure proves insufficient.

Even if we suspend the self/other-regarding scheme and characterize aesthetic action as the expression of moral excellence, problems remain. Morality and prudence also presuppose virtuous character traits – courage, generosity, integrity, and temperance. These are the same qualities that define noble action. Thus, aesthetic value cannot lie simply in the presence of virtue, or else morality and prudence risk becoming subordinate domains of aesthetics.

A further complication follows: if both prudence and aesthetics fall within the non-coercive sphere, why should they remain separately classified? Are they not both domains that concern recommendation rather than obligation? Without a more substantive principle of differentiation, the tripartite model risks conceptual instability.

To resolve this ambiguity, I propose understanding aesthetic action as *world-regarding conduct* – a form of action whose focus and scope extend beyond the self and immediate others to embrace broader ideals and collective concerns. Although Mill does not explicitly use the term "world-regarding," his description of noble aspiration – to "leave the world better than one found it" (CW21.248; CW28.202) – exemplifies the essence of aesthetic action. His broader writings leave room for such an interpretation.

Mill laments the lack of public spirit in Victorian Britain. He criticizes those "whose ambition is self-regarding," who seek no higher purpose beyond personal or familial gain, describing such a mindset as "poor and insignificant" (CW1.59–61; CW21.253–54). While he does not consider these lives immoral – acknowledging that such individuals often behave fairly and contribute to charity – he identifies their deficiency in their indifference to the public good. As Devigne observes, "the passive outlook of the English" may prevent "great wickedness" but fosters "a type of character that has little love for nation, human improvement, human agency, and virtue" (Devigne 2006, 58–59). This diagnosis is echoed in Mill's 1854 diary, where he writes that what the age most urgently needs is "the creed of Epicurus warmed by the additional element of an enthusiastic love of the general good" (CW27.666). What he envisions is a synthesis of personal cultivation and civic idealism – a disposition that closely resembles the philosophical attitude embedded in aesthetic action.

Serving the general good promotes others' happiness and is praiseworthy, but it does not constitute a moral duty. In *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, Mill endorses Comte's concept of a "religion of humanity," yet criticizes Comte's excessive moralism for condemning any personal interest not wholly subordinated to the public good (CW10.336). While we are obligated to assist those in need, this obligation does not require the complete sacrifice of the self. Acts that exceed these bounds possess a distinctive power. Mother Teresa's service exemplifies this: her extraordinary devotion evokes and elevates moral imagination in a way that mere duty-fulfillment cannot.

Justice is no different. Within the bounds of obligation, justice operates through explicit and implicit rules governing obligatory conduct. An agent without righteous conscience may still comply through external sanctions; the duty is met. Yet justice can

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transcend obligation. It demands the courageous expression of principled conviction that challenges and transforms existing standards – acts that cannot be externally coerced but only emerge from commitment to noble ideals. When Devigne (2006, 214) grounds all justice in the self-respect of moral rule-adherence, he obscures the distinction between justice-as-duty and justice-as-transcendent-principle, overlooking how conscience becomes constitutive precisely when justice exceeds obligation.

As we shall see, the persistence of aesthetic action depends upon the development of noble character – a development pursued through appreciation of natural scenery or art and the cultivation of beauty. The development of human capacities, qualities, virtues, and imagination is fundamentally an exercise in self-development, which belongs to the domain of prudence. Yet when self-cultivation transcends a certain threshold, it ceases to be merely self-regarding; it radiates outward, inspiring and elevating those who witness it. Mill illustrates this transformation: one who is "eminent in any of the qualities which conduce to his own good" draws "nearer to the ideal perfection of human nature" and becomes "a proper object of admiration" (CW18.278), and such a person "will desire to realize it in his own life" by keeping "a type of perfect beauty in human character" before him (CW21.255). Thus, self-regarding development becomes exemplary – both worthy of admiration and capable of inspiring others through the model it presents.

Aesthetic action is fundamentally exemplary: through the choices individuals make in their lives, they embody new ways of living and advance humanity's moral and civilizational standards. It cannot be coerced, transcends individual lifetimes, derives from abstract ideals rather than personal concerns, and depends upon imagination – the capacity to envision such a form of human life as possible.

## 3 Self-sacrifice and the highest happiness

Building on the distinction between noble character and noble action, this section examines how the domain of aesthetics incorporates the phenomenon of self-sacrifice, which seemingly conflicts with utilitarian self-interest yet plays a central role in Mill's conception of higher happiness.

Mill's art of life framework addresses the complex place of self-sacrifice in utilitarian ethics. He acknowledges that virtuous character does not always lead to conventional happiness; historical exemplars such as Socrates, Jesus, Condorcet, and John Brown suffered persecution or death, suggesting that noble individuals may endure greater hardship (CW8.952). Nevertheless, Mill regards the capacity to "resign entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it, for the sake of others" as profoundly noble, considering such readiness "the highest virtue which can be found in man" (CW10.217). He attributes the necessity of such actions to society's imperfection.

However, within Mill's framework, self-sacrifice for the sake of others, when it goes beyond the requirements of moral duty, cannot be compelled. Reconciling such noble acts with utilitarianism requires careful consideration. Mill insists that no one should be forced to sacrifice their own happiness for the collective; utilitarianism holds that "one person's happiness . . . is counted for exactly as much as another's" (CW10.257) and advocates a morality "grounded on large and wise views of the good of the whole, neither sacrificing the individual to the aggregate nor the aggregate to the individual" (CW10.421). To compel sacrifice would violate individual liberty and ultimately undermine utility. Therefore, noble actions should be encouraged through persuasion and gratitude, rather than by coercion.

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In *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, Mill distinguishes between obligatory altruism and meritorious sacrifice:

> There is a standard of altruism to which all should be required to come up, and a degree beyond it which is not obligatory, but meritorious. [ . . . ] If [ . . . ] persons make the good of others a direct object of disinterested exertions [ . . . ] they deserve gratitude and honour and are fit objects of moral praise (CW10.338).

Such actions belong to the "region of positive worthiness," going beyond moral duty and regarded as meritorious acts of supererogation (Berger 1984, 26–28; Brink 2013, 103–06; Donner and Fumerton 2009, 43; Eggleston 2017, 367–68; Jacobson 2003, 10–11; Miller 2010, 91; Riley 2011, 135–37).[3] Therefore, for Mill, the spontaneity of sacrifice is critical: "a necessary condition is its spontaneity; since the notion of a happiness for all, procured by the self-sacrifice of each, if the abnegation is really felt to be a sacrifice, is a contradiction" (CW10.338). This leads to an irony: what appears as sacrifice from the outside may not be experienced as a genuine loss by the agent.

This apparent paradox is resolved by Mill's theory of qualitative pleasures. For noble-minded individuals, actions that embody aesthetic ideals – even when they involve personal cost – are not merely endured but chosen as expressions of their core values and aspirations. As Mill notes in *On Liberty*, voluntary choices reflect what is "desirable, or at the least endurable" to the individual, and true well-being is achieved through autonomous pursuit (CW18.299). For them, neglecting to act nobly results in profound dissatisfaction, while the pursuit of noble purpose – even at personal expense – brings a sense of fulfillment that transcends ordinary pleasure (see Fox 2021). As Riley (2019, 201) observes, voluntary self-sacrifice redefines happiness by aligning it with moral and aesthetic ideals, granting a kind of sublime satisfaction to those who embody these ideals. Thus, while outsiders may see such acts as renunciation, the agent experiences them as the realization of a higher unity with universal welfare.

Within Mill's framework, even when noble action involves self-sacrifice, it does not constitute a net loss for the noble-minded agent who acts voluntarily. Rather, it brings its own form of reward. The happiness attained through such acts appears to represent the highest form of happiness available to human beings. In his *Inaugural Address*, Mill emphasizes that while aesthetic actions may not lead to direct tangible rewards, "there is one reward which will not fail you, and which may be called disinterested, because it is not a consequence, but is inherent in the very fact of deserving it" (CW21.257). This suggests that aesthetic action, though not externally compelled nor materially rewarded, yields a form of internal fulfillment that transcends ordinary notions of utility.

For example, individuals who devote themselves to the abolition of slavery may find themselves unsupported – facing opposition, isolation, and even failure to achieve their immediate goals. Nevertheless, Mill holds that such individuals can still experience deep and genuine happiness. This happiness, however, does not stem from subjective self-satisfaction or external recognition. From Mill's perspective, its source lies in the conviction that the actions undertaken possess objective moral worth – namely, that they would be approved and supported by those one holds in the highest moral regard. Whether it be deceased family members, lost friends, or exemplary historical figures

[3]Jacobson argues that despite the concept of consequentialism being formulated after Sidgwick, interpreting Mill's utilitarianism as orthodox consequentialism is problematic. Specifically, he claims that Mill's acknowledgment of supererogation challenges this interpretation (Jacobson 2008).

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such as Socrates, Howard, Washington, Antoninus, or Christ, Mill believes that the imagined approval of such figures can ground a profound and morally justified sense of fulfillment (CW10.421–22; see also CW10.95–96; CW21.254).

Even in the absence of worldly rewards, aesthetic action allows individuals to transcend personal desire and take part in something larger than themselves. It is not happiness in the "humble sense," but, as Mill puts it, the kind of happiness "that human beings with highly developed faculties can care to have" (CW8.952). While happiness derived from aesthetic or noble action is often perceived as less substantial than worldly rewards, it is in fact no less real – and arguably, more enduring – owing to its foundation in human dignity and the intrinsic worth of noble action (Loizides 2017). It is a form of happiness rooted in the objective value of doing what is truly noble by the best standards humanity has to offer. In this way, aesthetic action makes possible the highest form of happiness – realized by free and autonomous individuals who fulfill their human potential by committing themselves to ideals that endure beyond their own lives and serve the broader moral progress of society (see Miller 2010, 54–70).

Importantly, the results of aesthetic action are often not immediately visible; nevertheless, this does not mean that self-sacrifice in this domain is meaningless or wasted. As Mill notes, aesthetic actions frequently involve "distant or unobvious interests" (CW19.445) and seldom produce immediate outcomes, making their benefits difficult to estimate or even perceive, which can obscure their ultimate significance (Loizides 2013, 140). However, he rejects the idea of futile self-sacrifice (CW10.217–18). In the domain of aesthetics, calculation is neither absent nor irrelevant; rather, it is often more complex, and its consequences are more dispersed than in matters of prudence or immediate moral obligation. For example, Mill points out that although his efforts for women's suffrage did not succeed during his lifetime, they significantly shifted public attitudes and paved the way for future reforms (CW1.275–76). He further notes that the abolition of slavery in Europe and of serfdom in Russia became possible because moral values spread more widely among the public and concern for the common good increased (CW19.382). In this way, even when the beneficial effects of aesthetic action are indirect or only gradually realized, such actions still promote moral evolution and thereby contribute to utility in the long run (CW10.235–37; CW21.256–57).

In sum, voluntary, noble self-sacrifice is not a contradiction in Mill's utilitarianism but evidence of its capacity to accommodate the highest human aspirations. Aesthetic actions rooted in cultivated character and expanded sympathy bring profound qualitative happiness and contribute to long-term utility, often by challenging existing norms and inspiring the gradual evolution of moral consciousness.

## 4 Enlarged sympathy

### *4.1 From calculation to conscience*

While self-sacrifice can lead to the highest happiness, the tension between self-interest and the general good cannot be fully resolved without fundamentally rethinking the boundaries of the self. Some radical approaches, as Donner (2011, 161–62) notes, propose the dissolution of separate selfhood – such as in certain deep ecological theories – as a way to reconcile the interests of self and others. However, Donner emphasizes that Mill explicitly maintains a clear distinction between self and others, and therefore rejects the idea that these interests can be reconciled by dissolving the boundaries of individual selfhood.

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This challenge, however, may underestimate Mill's resources for addressing the problem within his empiricist framework. Rather than seeking to erase the distinction between self and others, Mill develops the concept of "enlarged sympathy," which provides a psychologically realistic account of how individuals can extend their concern beyond themselves to embrace broader social interests. Importantly, Bentham also preserves the distinction between self and others, but his approach to resolving the tension is fundamentally different. This marks a fundamental departure from Bentham's psychological hedonism, which grounds all action in pleasure-pain calculations and treats virtue primarily as the alignment of personal and public interests rather than as a matter of selfless sacrifice.

Bentham's psychological hedonism rests on the principle that "the actions of sentient beings are wholly determined by pleasure and pain" (CW10.12). From this premise, he constructs a motivational theory whereby each pleasure or pain creates corresponding motives, with actions determined by the balance of competing interests. This leads Bentham to contend that even "the most public-spirited (which is as much as to say the most virtuous) of men" can only work to bring public and private interests "to a state as nearly approaching to coincidence ... as possible" (CW10.14–15). Bentham thus characterizes society as "a collection of persons pursuing each his separate interest or pleasure" and "Man, that most complex being, is a very simple one in his eyes," (CW10.96–97), with virtue consisting primarily in the effort to align personal and public interests. Yet this framework cannot adequately explain genuine self-sacrifice divorced from calculation.

Mill offers a different account. He recognized that Bentham ignored "the power of a disinterested conscience to override self-interest in cases of conflict" (Riley 2019, 186–87). Genuine virtue emerges not from interest-calculations but from pre-cognitive moral impulses: an individual's instinctive recoil from wrongdoing, driven by immediate conscience rather than calculated consequences. This non-calculative aversion – "determined by pain ... which precedes the act, not by one which is expected to follow it" – forms virtue's essence, for "unless it be so, the man is not really virtuous" (CW10.12–13). Mill challenges Bentham's reductive paradigm, arguing that Bentham's psychology overlooks humanity's multidimensional motives. Where Bentham sees interest-calculations, Mill identifies conscience, duty, honor, dignity, and love of beauty as motives for action (CW10.13, 95).

This recognition leads to Mill's most distinctive insight: individuals can achieve the highest happiness precisely by sacrificing their own happiness for others. This paradox resolves when the agent no longer experiences sacrifice as sacrifice. Mill's emphasis on character cultivation develops moral dispositions where virtuous action becomes spontaneous rather than calculated. This distinguishes his utilitarianism from Bentham's, revealing how authentic virtue transcends mere pleasure-pain calculations.

### 4.2 Imagination and the expansion of sympathy

How can an individual, while maintaining the distinction between self and others, come to act for the sake of others or the general good, rather than from mere calculative self-interest? What makes it possible for someone not to experience sacrifice for others as a mere cost or loss? For Mill, the core psychological basis for such action is sympathy: our natural capacity to experience and care about the feelings of others (CW10.220;

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CW19.404). In everyday life, this natural sympathy easily binds parents, children, lovers, and friends, often without conscious effort. However, Mill cautions that "sympathetic selfishness," a form of sympathetic instinct restricted to close ties, if relied on alone, narrows our concern and breeds indifference toward those outside that circle (CW10.394).

For Mill, overcoming the limitations of narrow or instinctive sympathy is essential to achieve utilitarian ends. At the center of this moral development lies the faculty of imagination. In *Bentham*, Mill distinguishes between two types of imagination. The first is the conventional use of imagery and metaphor, which Bentham possessed to some extent. The second, and more profound, is a form of imagination that, according to Mill, constitutes a poet – the ability "to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it" (CW10.92).

This poetic imagination enables individuals not only to enter into the experiences and emotions of others, but also to relate meaningfully to vast and abstract entities – such as society, humanity, or even future generations – as if they were tangible realities. Imagination facilitates the process of "getting individuals to incorporate their own life narratives into the story of humanity" (Heydt 2006, 90), extending sympathy from intimate relations to universal humankind. The cultivation of imagination is therefore essential. This cultivation develops what Mill calls "social feelings" (CW10.231–32) – the natural desire to unite with others and transcend exclusive self-interest.

*Utility of Religion* presents both the necessity and the possibility of extending sympathy even to abstract or nonexistent entities. Recognizing that "if individual life is short, the life of the human species is not," Mill argues that the indefinite duration and perfectibility of humanity "offer to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration" – a "noble capability" unique to human nature (CW10.420). Yet this capacity "implies indeed a certain cultivation" (CW10.420): the fact that sympathy is natural provides "the possibility of cultivating goodness and nobleness, and the hope of their ultimate ascendancy" (CW10.394).

Art education is identified as the key mechanism for cultivating nobleness. Sensibility to beauty and imagination – developed through poetry and art via emotion and beauty rather than logic alone – constitute this mechanism. In his notes to his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, Mill endorses Ruskin's definition of beauty: "everything which gives us the emotion of the Beautiful, is expressive and emblematic of one or other of certain lofty or lovely ideas" (CW31.224), wherein these aesthetic elements "give a stronger stimulus and a deeper delight to the imagination" (CW31.224–25). This view resonates in his *Inaugural Address*, where he argues that "Art … trains us … to idealize … most of all, our own characters and lives" (CW21.256) – thereby fostering virtue by making individuals "love virtue and feel it" (CW21.253–54).

The psychological basis of aesthetic action emerges from the interplay of enlarged sympathy and imagination, both nurtured through art education. When individuals learn through art to idealize nobility and perfection – to envision the highest possibilities of human character and life – they undergo a profound reorientation: the boundaries of self-interest dissolve, and the agent is reconstituted as inherently oriented toward the universal good. This is not mere sentiment but a fundamental metamorphosis of moral consciousness itself.

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## 5 Sense of duty to the world

For Mill, truly virtuous persons engage in aesthetic action from conscience preceding deliberation, not self-interested calculation. This suggests that the motivation for aesthetic action can indeed be a sense of duty, which challenges the standard interpretation of duty and sanction in Mill's ethical framework.

Mill makes clear that only morality constitutes a duty in the strict sense: individuals may rightfully be compelled to fulfill moral requirements and punished for failure, much like a debtor is obliged to repay a debt (CW10.246–47). By contrast, prudence and aesthetics are matters of persuasion and recommendation rather than compulsion or sanction. The prevailing scholarly consensus holds that only morality falls within the scope of enforceable obligation, while prudence and aesthetics are excluded from the domain of sanction and duty (Donner and Fumerton 2009, 44; Lyons 1994, 117; Ryan 1991, 164).

However, this strict separation is not absolute. Mill recognizes that truly virtuous individuals may act from conscience even outside the domain of enforceable moral duty. His advocacy for women's suffrage provides a crucial example: he describes it as undertaken "as a moral and social duty" (CW1.275–76), though not one coercively enforceable on others as paradigmatic moral obligations are. In other words, Mill acknowledges that individuals can feel a genuine sense of duty – and accompanying guilt – toward pursuits not formally regarded as social duties.

Contrary to interpretations that confine sanctions to the moral domain – that the appropriateness of guilt attaches only to breaches of moral obligations (Jacobson 2008, 182; Lyons 1994, 53; Miller 2010) – Mill's account reveals that guilt and related sanctions arise even in domains outside obligatory morality. Thus, the relation between duty, sanction, and Mill's three domains proves more intricate than the prevailing picture allows.

The central issue, then, is the function of sanctions. Within Mill's framework, violations of moral duty rightfully deserve punishment, but prudential and aesthetic failures do not. Sanctions – whether external (law, public opinion) or internal (self-reproach based on conscience) – serve as regulatory mechanisms in response to violations of moral duty (CW10.228). Importantly, to say that an action deserves sanction does not mean it must actually receive punishment, nor does it specify the type of sanction; it simply means the action is blameworthy in principle. What matters for our discussion is that prudential and aesthetic failures are not, in themselves, deserving of sanction or suitable for social enforcement. However, this does not imply that no form of sanction ever operates in these domains.

Why, then, do virtuous individuals sometimes experience internal sanctions even when no moral rule has been broken? The answer lies in the connection between internal sanctions and the agent's deeply held convictions. Mill defines internal sanctions as "whatever our standard of duty may be, one and the same thing – a feeling in our own mind; a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty" (CW10.228).

Individuals can experience guilt for failures of prudential or aesthetic ideals they have internalized, rather than for moral duty violations. Those who internalize diligence, sincerity, and moderation as fundamental principles may experience guilt when acting imprudently – consuming excessively or spending time idly, much as if these were moral duties. Even clergy who lose religious faith may suffer from guilt. People who strongly advocate animal protection but are forced in coercive situations to act against their principles, or those who recognize serious social problems but fail to take action, may

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experience guilt, disappointment, self-reproach, shame, and self-hatred. For those who have cultivated such ideals as personal obligations, falling short can trigger strong internal sanctions – even in the absence of external moral breach.

Mill does not formalize duties to oneself (Donner and Fumerton 2009, 44; Lyons 1994, 117; Ryan 1991, 164). However, his framework does not deny the psychological reality that individuals treat personal ideals with the gravity and emotional consequences of duty, even if violating them does not involve wrongdoing requiring social accountability.

Importantly, Mill's view that prudential and aesthetic failures are not subject to punishment does not imply that negative social reactions are always absent. People naturally respond negatively to imprudent or aesthetically deficient behavior, and such responses can function as informal external sanctions. Self-regarding defects – such as gambling, drinking, intemperance, laziness, and uncleanliness (CW18.280) – or the failure to save for the future (CW2.162–63), are not legally punishable, yet they often lead to social disadvantages, loss of reputation, or, in extreme cases, "very severe penalties" of social disapproval (CW18.278). When such defects hinder an individual from fulfilling a distinct and assignable obligation – such as supporting one's family – they may become subject to rightful blame and formal punishment (CW18.281).

Unlike Bentham's virtuous person who acts from calculative interest-alignment, Mill's truly virtuous individual develops internal standards that function as personal regulatory principles. He argues that human excellence depends on "taking the approbation of a morally perfect Being as the standard by which to regulate our own characters and lives" (CW10.485–86). Treating such aspirational standards as personal regulatory principles – habitually seeking their approval and feeling guilt or self-reproach when neglecting them – is functionally similar to internalizing them as personal but not formally moral duties. This involves experiencing moral approval when performing aesthetic actions and experiencing guilt when neglecting them. Thus, the capacity for aesthetic action is shaped by what self-imposed standards regulate the individual beyond externally enforced moral requirements, and how deeply these defining standards are formed and internalized.

The possibility of sustained aesthetic action depends considerably on an individual's cultivated character: who that person is, what they pursue, and what they regard as happiness. This marks a significant departure from Bentham, whose rejection of perfectionist ideals precluded any evaluation of human beings against higher standards (Heydt 2006, 54). For Mill, by contrast, the formative and motivational power of such ideals lies precisely in the fact that they shape action and character simultaneously.

Through cultivated character that aspires to nobility and perfection, individuals develop a sense of obligation toward these ideals – not through external coercion, but through powerful internal sanctions. In this way, one may come to regard these ideals with the gravity of duty, extending this sense of obligation beyond the self to encompass the world at large.

## 6 Distinct domains of the art of life

How should one live? Mill's answer unfolds through a tripartite division of human conduct: morality, prudence, and aesthetics. Rather than applying utility as a direct guide to action, Mill recognizes that "utility, or happiness, [is] much too complex and indefinite an end to be sought except through the medium of various secondary ends" (CW10.110). Each domain operates according to its own principles: morality through

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duty, prudence through self-development, aesthetics through noble ideals. Within this framework, different types of conduct promote utility in distinct but complementary ways.

Moral guidance is other-regarding, grounded in general principles that evaluate the "consequences of classes of actions" (CW10.180). Mill clearly distinguishes moral from non-moral domains. Moral actions – such as refraining from murder or theft, or providing help in need – are duties that moral obligation demands and, crucially, can enforce through social sanction – formal or informal. This secures the foundation of social trust and cooperation while delineating the boundaries of social interference.

Prudential guidance is self-regarding, grounded in principles that assess the "consequences of individual actions" (CW10.180) in varying circumstances. Mill defines prudence as "a correct foresight of consequences, a just estimation of their importance to the object in view, and repression of any unreflecting impulse at variance with the deliberate purpose" (CW7.107). Yet as Mill argues, "there are different orders of expediency" (CW28.152) – actions that undermine higher orders of expediency cannot be deemed truly expedient (CW10.223).

Accordingly, prudent guidance encompasses not merely the calculation of consequences but also the cultivation of habits and virtues – integrity, self-discipline, sincerity, practical wisdom, nobility, and imagination – the principles through which one develops oneself and achieves a coherent life trajectory aligned with broader goods.[4]

Aesthetic guidance, by contrast, is world-regarding in scope. Unlike morality and prudence, it is not governed by codified duty or instrumental calculation, but oriented toward ideals such as justice, beauty, dignity, and nobility – ideals whose reach transcends both personal advantage and interpersonal obligation. Aesthetic action embodies ideals in individual lives that become models for social transformation. Unlike moral duty, which can be enforced, aesthetic ideals shape humanity through lived demonstration: they show what is possible, what matters, and what values deserve pursuit. Such action transcends the individual agent, for each exemplary life can influence countless others and reshape the standards by which societies understand themselves.

Mill emphasizes that the aesthetic principle plays a generative role within human life. He notes, "the domain of moral duty is always widening," and actions not yet subsumed under duty may still be "meritorious" (CW10.338). As Donner argues, the aesthetic domain contains the element of progress (Donner and Fumerton 2009, 53; Donner 2011, 148).

Ultimately, although these three domains are normatively distinct, they are deeply interdependent in practice. Morality maintains the external fabric of ethical obligation and social trust; prudence cultivates internal consistency through habits and virtues that constitute self-development; aesthetics widens the horizon of ethical imagination and aspiration. Each domain sustains the realization of utility through a unique ethical mode: duty to others, care of the self, and aspirational commitment to the world.

By preserving the independence of each domain while recognizing their practical interdependence, Mill's framework makes the art of life a coherent ethical guide to human flourishing.

[4]Prudence in Mill may be understood as a self-regarding domain, concerned with self-interest or self-development. In some interpretations, it also includes broader or general interests (Berger 1984; Brink 2013; Brown 2017; Donner 2010; Gray 1996; Jacobson 2008; Lyons 1994; Riley 2011; Ryan 1991). Some readings further suggest that "expediency" and "prudence" in Mill should be interpreted in impartialist terms (Miller 2010, 81).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820826100363 Published online by Cambridge University Press

**Acknowledgements.** I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions, which improved this paper.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

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**Cite this article:** Bae, Nina. 2026. Mill's Aesthetic Action: A Reconceptualization as World-Regarding Action. *Utilitas* **38**, 203–218. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820826100363

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