

# Martha C. Nussbaum

## *Mill between Aristotle & Bentham*

Who is the happy Warrior? Who is he  
That every man in arms should wish to  
be?

– William Wordsworth, “Character of  
the Happy Warrior”

Man does not strive after happiness; only  
the Englishman does that.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, “Maxims and  
Arrows”

Powerful philosophical conceptions  
conceal, even while they reveal. By shin-  
ing a strong light on some genuinely im-  
portant aspects of human life, Jeremy

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& Sciences

Bentham’s Utilitarianism concealed others. His concern with aggregating the interests of each and every person obscured, for a time, the fact that some issues of justice cannot be well handled through mere summing of the interests of all. His radical abhorrence of suffering and his admirable ambition to bring all sentient beings to a state of well-being and satisfaction obscured, for a time, the fact that well-being and satisfaction might not be all there is to the human good, or even all there is to happiness. Other things – such as activity, loving, fullness of commitment – might also be involved.

Indeed, so powerful was the obscuring power of Bentham’s insights that a question that Wordsworth took to be altogether askable, and which, indeed, he spent eighty-five lines answering – the question what happiness really is – soon looked to philosophers under Bentham’s influence like a question whose answer was so obvious that it could not be asked in earnest.

Thus Henry Prichard, albeit a foe of Utilitarianism, was so influenced by Bentham’s conception in his thinking about happiness that he simply assumed that any philosopher who talked about happiness must have been identifying it with pleasure or satisfaction. When Aristotle asked what happiness is, Prichard

argued, he could not really have been asking the question he appears to have been asking, since its answer was so obvious: happiness is contentment or satisfaction. Instead of asking what happiness consists in, then, he must really have been asking about the instrumental means to the production of happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche, similarly, understood happiness to be a state of pleasure and contentment, and expressed his scorn for Englishmen who pursued that goal rather than richer goals involving suffering for a noble end, continued striving, activities that put contentment at risk, and so forth. Unaware of the richer English tradition concerning happiness that Wordsworth's poem embodied, he simply took English 'happiness' to be what Bentham said it was.

But Wordsworth's poem, indeed, represented an older and longer tradition of thinking about happiness – derived from ancient Greek thought about *eudaimonia* and its parts, and inherited via the usual English translation of *eudaimonia* as 'happiness.' According to this tradition, represented most fully in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, happiness is generally agreed to be a kind of living that is active, inclusive of all that has intrinsic value, and complete, lacking nothing that would make it richer or better. Aristotle then proceeded to argue for a more specific conception of happiness that identified it with a specific plurality of valuable activities – for example, activities in accordance with ethical, intellectual,

and political excellences,<sup>2</sup> and activities involved in love and friendship. Pleasure, he believed, is not identical with happiness, but usually accompanies the unimpeded performance of the activities that constitute happiness.

Wordsworth was relying on a conception like this when he asked what the character and demeanor of the happy Warrior would be in each of the many areas of life. As J. L. Austin memorably wrote in a devastating critique of Prichard on Aristotle, "I do not think Wordsworth meant . . . : 'This is the warrior who feels *pleased*.' Indeed, he is 'Doomed to go in company with Pain / And fear and bloodshed, miserable train.'" As Austin saw, the important thing about the happy Warrior is that he has traits that make him capable of performing all of life's many activities in an exemplary way, and that he acts in accordance with those traits. He is moderate, kind, courageous, loving, a good friend, concerned for the community, honest,<sup>3</sup> not excessively attached to honor or worldly ambition, a lover of reason, an equal lover of home and family. His life is happy because it is full and rich, even though it sometimes may involve pain and loss.

John Stuart Mill knew both the Benthamite and the Aristotelian/Wordsworthian conceptions of happiness and was torn between them. Despite his many

2 I thus render the Greek *aretê*, usually translated as 'virtue.' *Aretê* need not be ethical; indeed it need not even be a trait of a person. It is a trait of anything, whatever that thing is, that makes it good at doing what that sort of thing characteristically does. Thus Plato can speak of the *aretê* of a pruning knife.

3 Here we see the one major departure from Aristotle that apparently seemed to Wordsworth required by British morality. Aristotle does not make much of honesty. In other respects, Wordsworth is remarkably close to Aristotle, whether he knew it or not.

1 Henry A. Prichard, "The Meaning of *Agathon* in the *Ethics* of Aristotle," *Philosophy* 10 (1935): 27–39, famously discussed and criticized in J. L. Austin, "*Agathon* and *Eudaimonia* in the *Ethics* of Aristotle," in Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1–31. My account of Prichard follows Austin's, including his (fair) account of Prichard's implicit premises.

criticisms of Bentham, he never stopped representing himself as a defender of Bentham's general line. Meanwhile, he was a lover of the Greeks and a lover of Wordsworth, the poet whom he credited with curing his depression. Mill seems never to have fully realized the extent of the tension between the two conceptions; thus he never described the conflict between them, nor argued for the importance of the pieces he appropriated from each one.

The unkind way of characterizing the result would be to say that Mill was deeply confused and had no coherent conception of happiness. The kinder and, I believe, more accurate thing to say is that, despite Mill's unfortunate lack of clarity about how he combined the two conceptions, he really did have a more or less coherent idea of how to integrate them – giving richness of life and complexity of activity a place they do not have in Bentham, and giving pleasure and the absence of pain and of depression a role that Aristotle never sufficiently mapped out. The result is the basis, at least, for a conception of happiness that is richer than both of its sources – more capable of doing justice to all the elements that thoughtful people have associated with that elusive idea.

Bentham has a way of making life seem simpler than it is. He asserts that the only thing good in itself is pleasure, and the only thing bad in itself is pain. From the assertion that these two "masters" have a very powerful influence on human conduct, he passes without argument to the normative claim that the proper goal of conduct is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. The principle of utility, as he puts it, is "that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or

diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness." In turn, he defines utility in a manner that shows his characteristic disregard of distinctions that have mattered greatly to philosophers:

By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered.

Ignoring or flouting the long Western philosophical tradition that had debated whether happiness could be identified with pleasure – a tradition in which the negative answer greatly predominated, the positive answer being endorsed by few apart from the Epicureans – Bentham simply declares that pleasure, good, and happiness are all the same thing, and goes on from there.

An equally long philosophical tradition before Bentham had debated how we should understand the nature of pleasure. We speak of pleasure as a type of experience, but we also say things like, "My greatest pleasures are listening to Mahler and eating steak." Such ways of talking raise several questions, for instance: Is pleasure a single unitary thing, or many things? Is it a feeling, or a way of being active, or, perhaps, activity itself? Is it a sensation at all, if such very different experiences count as pleasures? Could there be any one feeling or sensation that both listening to Mahler's Tenth and eating a steak have in common?

Plato, Aristotle, and a whole line of subsequent philosophers discussed such questions with great subtlety. Bentham

simply ignores them. As Mill writes, “Bentham failed in deriving light from other minds.” For him, pleasure is a single homogeneous sensation containing no qualitative differences. The only variations in pleasure are quantitative: it can vary in intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity or remoteness, and, finally, in causal properties (tendency to produce more pleasure, etc.). Perhaps Bentham’s deep concern with pain – which can somewhat plausibly be considered as a unitary sensation varying only in intensity and duration – is the source of his feeling that various pleasures do not meaningfully differ in quality. But this conclusion, Mill says, is the result of “the empiricism of one who has had little experience” – either external, he adds, or internal, through the imagination.

Activity, at the same time, plays no special role in Bentham’s system. The goal of right action is to maximize pleasure, understood as a sensation. That is the only good thing there is in the world. So, in effect, people and animals are large containers of sensations of pleasure or satisfaction. Their capacity for agency is of interest only in the sense that it makes them capable of choosing actions that produce utility. A person who gets pleasure by being hooked up to an experience machine – the famous example of the late Robert Nozick – is just as well off as the person who gets pleasure by loving and eating and listening. Even in the context of nonhuman animals, this is a very reduced picture of what is valuable in life. Where human beings are concerned, it leaves out more or less everything.

Nor is Bentham worried about interpersonal comparisons, a problem on which economists in the Utilitarian tradition have labored greatly. For Bentham there is no such problem: when we en-

large our scope of consideration from one person to many people, we simply just add a new dimension of quantity. Right action is ultimately defined as that which produces the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. Moreover, Bentham sees no problem in extending the comparison class to the entire world of sentient animals.

Another problem that has troubled economists in the Benthamite tradition is that of evil pleasures. If people get pleasure from inflicting harm on others, as so often they do, should that count as a pleasure that makes society better? Most economists who follow Bentham have tried to draw some lines here, in order to rule out the most sadistic and malicious pleasures. In so doing, they complicate the Utilitarian system in a way that Bentham would not have approved, introducing an ethical value that is not itself reducible to pleasure or pain.

What is most attractive about Bentham’s program is its focus on the urgent needs of sentient beings for relief from suffering. Indeed, one of the most appealing aspects of his thought is its great compassion for the suffering of animals, which he takes to be unproblematically comparable to human suffering.<sup>4</sup> But Bentham cannot be said to have developed anything like a convincing account of pleasure and pain, of happiness, or of social utility. Because of his attachment to a dogmatic simplicity, his view cries out for adequate philosophical development.

Unlike Bentham, Aristotle sees that the nature of happiness is very difficult to pin down. In book 1 of the *Nicomachean*

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that he denied that animals suffered at the very thought of death, and thus he argued that the painless killing of an animal should sometimes be permitted.

*Ethics*, he sets about that task. He argues that there is general agreement on several formal characteristics of happiness: It must be *most final*, that is, inclusive of all that has intrinsic value. It must be *self-sufficient*, by which he means that there is nothing that can be added to it that would increase its value. (He immediately makes clear that self-sufficiency does not imply solitariness: the sort of self-sufficiency he is after is one that includes relationships with family, friends, and fellow citizens.) It must be *active*, since we all agree that happiness is equivalent to “living well and doing well.” It must be *generally available*, to anyone who makes the right sort of effort, since we don’t want to define happiness as something only a few can enjoy. And it must be relatively *stable*, not something that can be removed by any chance misfortune.

Aristotle concludes this apparently uncontroversial part of his argument by suggesting that there is a further deep agreement: happiness is made up of activity that is in accordance with excellence, either one excellence, or, if there are more than one, then the greatest and most complete. Scholars argue a lot about the precise meaning of this passage, but let me simply assert. He must mean, whatever the excellent activities of a human life turn out to be, happiness involves all of these in some suitable combination, and the way all the activities fit together to make up a whole life is itself an element in the value of that life.

In the remainder of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers the areas of human life in which we characteristically act and make choices, trying to identify the excellent way of acting in each of these areas. He seems to think that there is relatively little controversy about the fact that courage, moderation, justice, etc. are worth pursuing; the controversy

pertains to the more precise definition of these excellences – presumably because in each of these spheres we all have to make some choice or another: we have to devise some way of facing the risk of death, some way of coping with our bodily appetites, etc.

Where in all of this does pleasure figure? Early in the work, Aristotle dismisses the claim that pleasure is identical with happiness, saying that living for pleasure only would be “to choose the life of dumb grazing animals.” Later he advances some further arguments against the identification. First of all, it is by no means easy to say exactly what pleasure is. Aristotle himself offers two very different conceptions of pleasure, one in book 7 and one in book 10. The first identifies pleasure with unimpeded activity (not so odd if we remember that we speak of “my pleasures” and “enjoyments”). The second, and probably better, account holds that pleasure is something that comes along with, that necessarily supervenes on, activity, “like the bloom on the cheek of youth”; one gets it by doing the relevant activity in a certain, apparently unimpeded or complete way. In any case, Aristotle does not regard pleasure as a single thing that varies only in intensity and duration; it contains qualitative differences related to the activities to which it attaches.

Furthermore, by his account, pleasure is just not the right thing to focus on in a normative account of the good life for a human being. Some pleasures are bad; evil people take pleasure in their evil behavior. Happiness, by contrast, *is* a normative notion: since it is constitutive of what we understand as “the human good life,” or “a flourishing life for a human being,” we cannot include evil pleasures in it.

Another problem, and a revealing one for Mill, is that some valuable activities

are not accompanied by pleasure. Aristotle's example is the courageous warrior (perhaps a source for Wordsworth's poem) who faces death in battle for the sake of a noble end. It is absurd to say that this warrior is pleased at the prospect of death, says Aristotle. Indeed, the better his life is, the more he thinks he has to lose and the more pain he is likely to feel at the prospect of death. Nonetheless, he is acting in accordance with excellence, and is aware of that; and so he is happy. This just goes to show, says Aristotle, that pleasure does not always accompany the activities that constitute happiness.

Meanwhile, according to Aristotle, there are people whose circumstances, by depriving them of activity, deprive them of happiness. He names the imprisoned and tortured as examples. If one has the unfortunate "luck of Priam" – whose friends, children, and way of life were suddenly snatched away from him by defeat and capture – here too one can be "dislodged from happiness."

Mill's *Utilitarianism* is organized as an extended defense of Bentham's program against the most common objections that had been raised against it. Mill defends both the idea that pleasure is identical with happiness and the idea that right action consists in producing the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Along the way, however, without open defection from the Benthamite camp, he introduces a number of crucial modifications.

First of all, he admits that "To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by ... [Bentham's] theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question." Shortly afterward, Mill makes it plain that, for him,

"Neither pains nor pleasures are homogenous": there are differences "*in kind*," apart from the question of intensity," that are evident to any competent judge. We cannot avoid recognizing qualitative differences, particularly between "higher" and "lower" pleasures. How, then, to judge between them?

Like Plato in book 9 of the *Republic*, Mill refers the choice to a competent judge who has experienced both alternatives. This famous passage shows Mill thinking of pleasures as very like activities, or, with Aristotle, as experiences so closely linked to activities that they cannot be pursued apart from them. In a later text, he counts music, virtue, and health as major pleasures. Elsewhere he shows that he has not left sensation utterly out of account: he asks "which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings." Clearly the unity of the Benthamite calculus – its reliance on quantity as the only source of variation in pleasures – has been thrown out, replaced here by an idea of competent judgment as to what "manner of existence" is most "worth having." This talk suggests that Mill, like Aristotle, imagines this judge as planning for a whole life, which should be complete as a whole and inclusive of all the major sources of value.

When Mill describes the way in which his judge makes choices, things get still more complicated. The reason an experienced judge will not choose the lower pleasures is "a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, ... and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them." So a sense of dignity is a part of what happiness is for many people: it acts as a gatekeeper, preventing the choice of a life de-

voted to mere sensation. Nozick's experience machine would clearly be rejected by this judge. Moreover, Mill continues, anyone who supposes that this sense of dignity will cause people to forfeit some of their happiness "confound[ds] two very different ideas, of happiness, and content." Mill has thus rejected one more of Bentham's equivalences.

Summarizing his discussion, Mill writes that the happiness which the ancient philosophers "meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and varied pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive." At this point Mill appears to have jettisoned the equivalence of happiness with pleasure: for happiness is now "made up of" pleasures, some pains, and activity; and its "parts" include virtue and the all-important sense of dignity. Even though pleasure itself is complex and heterogeneous, standing in a close relation to activity, it is here said to be but one part of happiness. And yet an emphasis on pleasure persists throughout Mill's work; he cannot utterly leave it aside.

Meanwhile, in one crucial passage, he shows us that his attitude toward pained virtue is subtly different from that of Aristotle and Wordsworth. Imagining a virtuous man in the present "imperfect state of the world's arrangements," he concludes that this man must sacrifice his own happiness if he wishes to promote the happiness of others. But Mill does not tell us enough about this man. If his sacrifice is very great, so that his life is deprived of activity, Mill's position may be Aristotelian: for Aristotle, we recall, judges that Priam is "dislodged from happiness" by his many and great misfortunes. But if this man is more like the happy Warrior who endures pain for a noble cause, then Mill, in judging him

to be unhappy, is at variance with Aristotle and Wordsworth.

We might put this point by saying that Mill sets the bar of fortune higher than Aristotle does. Aristotle thinks that fortune dislodges a person from happiness only when it impedes activity so severely that a person cannot execute his chosen plan of life at all. The pained warrior is happy because he can still live in his own chosen way, and that is a good way. For Mill, the presence of a great deal of pain seems significant beyond its potential for inhibiting activity. A life full of ethical and intellectual excellences and activity according to those excellences does not suffice for happiness if pleasure is insufficiently present, or if too much pain is present.

Why did Mill think this? Well, as he tells us, he had experienced such a life – not, like Wordsworth's warrior, in a moment of courageous risk-taking, but during a long period of depression. This life was the result of an upbringing that emphasized excellent activity to the exclusion of emotional satisfactions, including feelings of contentment, pleasure, and comfort.

Mill, as he famously records, and as much other evidence demonstrates, was brought up by his father to be able to display prodigious mastery of many intellectual skills, and to share his father's shame at powerful emotions. Nor did he receive elsewhere any successful or stable care for the emotional parts of his personality. Mill's mother was evidently a woman of no marked intellectual interests or accomplishments; she soon became very exhausted by bearing so many children. Her son experienced this as a lack of warmth. In a passage from an early draft of the *Autobiography* (he deleted the passage prior to publication at the urging of his wife Harriet)

Mill speaks of his mother with remarkable harshness:

That rarity in England, a really warm-hearted mother, would in the first place have made my father a totally different being, and in the second would have made his children grow up loving and being loved. But my mother, with the very best of intentions, only knew how to pass her life in drudging for them. Whatever she could do for them she did, and they liked her, because she was kind to them, but to make herself loved, looked up to, or even obeyed, required qualities which she unfortunately did not possess. I thus grew up in the absence of love and in the presence of fear; and many and indelible are the effects of this bringing up in the stunting of my moral growth.

In his early twenties, Mill encountered a crisis of depression. He remained active and carried out his plans, but he was aware of a deep inner void. He tried to relieve his melancholy through dedication to the general social welfare, but the blackness did not abate. The crucial turning point was a very mysterious incident that has been much discussed:

I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's *Memoirs*, and came to the passage which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them – would supply the place of all that they had lost. A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burthen grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone ...

Mill's Marmontel episode has typically been analyzed in terms of an alleged

death wish toward his father. The assumption is that Mill is identifying himself with Marmontel, and so expressing the desire to care for his family by displacing the father he feared. No doubt this interpretation is not altogether misguided, for hostility toward his father is a palpable emotion in the narrative, if counterbalanced by a great deal of love and admiration. The problem with this account, however, is that Mill does not seem particularly keen on caring for others, either before or after this episode. Indeed, he tells us that he tried to lift his depression by being actively concerned with the well-being of others, but that this effort did no good. Instead, the focus of his search is on finding care for himself, and in particular for the emotions and subjective feelings that his father had treated as shameful. It seems to me much more likely that Mill above all identifies with the orphaned family who were now going to receive the care they needed. He imagines someone saying to him, Your needs, your feelings of pain, deadness, and loneliness, will be recognized and fulfilled, you will have the care that you need. Your distress will be seen with love, and you will find someone who will be everything to you.

If we now examine the original Marmontel passage, as interpreters of the *Autobiography* usually do not bother to do, we see that it strongly confirms this reading. Marmontel makes it clear that his consolation of his family is accomplished through the aid of a difficult control over his own emotions, as he delivers his speech “without a single tear.” But at his words of comfort, streams of tears are suddenly released in his mother and younger siblings: tears no longer of bitter mourning, he says, but of relief at receiving comfort.<sup>5</sup> So Mill is clearly in

5 Jean François Marmontel, *Mémoires* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1999), 63: “Ma mère, mes



the emotional position not of the self-composed son, but of the weeping mother and children as they are relieved to find a comfort that assuages sorrow.

In part, as the *Autobiography* makes clear, Mill's wish for care is fulfilled when he becomes able to accept, care for, nourish, and value the previously hidden aspects of himself. In part, too, he shortly discovers in Harriet Taylor – as her letters show, an extremely emotional person who is very skilled at circumnavigating John's intellectual defenses – the person who would care for him as his mother, he felt, did not.

To relate the *Autobiography* to the complexities of Mill's relation to Bentham and Aristotle is conjectural. But it is the sort of conjecture that makes sense, and, moreover, the sort that Mill invites.

For Mill, then, we may suppose, the Aristotelian conception of happiness is too cold. It places too much weight on 'correct' activity – not enough on the receptive and childlike parts of the personality. One might act correctly and yet feel like "a stock or a stone." Here the childlike nature of Bentham's approach to life, which Mill often stresses, proves valuable: for Bentham understood how powerful pain and pleasure are for children, and for the child in us. Bentham did not value the emotional elements of the personality in the right way; he oversimplified them, lacking all understanding of poetry (as Mill insists) and of love (as we might add). But perhaps it was

the very childlike character of Bentham, the man who loved the pleasures of small creatures, who allowed the mice in his study to sit on his lap, that made him able to see something Aristotle did not see: the need that we all have to be held and comforted, the need to escape a terrible loneliness and deadness.

Mill's *Utilitarianism* is not a fully developed work. It frustrates philosophers who look for a tidy resolution to the many tensions it introduces into the Utilitarian system. But it has proved compelling over the ages because it contains a subtle awareness of human complexity that few philosophical works can rival. Here, as in his surprising writings on women, Mill stands out – an adult among the children, an empiricist with experience, a man who painfully attained the kind of self-knowledge that his great teacher lacked, and who turned that self-knowledge into philosophy.

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frères, mes soeurs, nous éprouvons, leur dis-je, la plus grande des afflictions; ne nous y laissons point abattre. Mes enfants, vous perdez un père; vous en retrouvez un; je vous en servirai; je le suis, je veux l'être; j'en embrasse tous les devoirs; et vous n'êtes plus orphelins.' À ces mots, des ruisseaux de larmes, mais de larmes bien moins amères, coulèrent de leurs yeux. 'Ah!' s'écria ma mère, en me pressant contre son coeur, 'mon fils! mon cher enfant! que je t'ai bien connu!'"