

## ARTICLE

# Troubled Hedonism and Social Justice: Mill and the Epicureans on the Ataraxic Life

Chris Barker 

The American University in Cairo, New Cairo, Egypt  
[chris.barker@aucegypt.edu](mailto:chris.barker@aucegypt.edu)

J. S. Mill is typically thought of as a liberal utilitarian disciple of Jeremy Bentham, and in other readings as a modern Socratic or even a modern Epicurean. Mill and the Epicureans are alike in several respects: they theorize personal freedom and active character versus determinism and passivity, they oppose excessive love and praise friendship, and they are critical of traditional religiosity. In spite of these similarities, Mill and the Epicureans have a different conception of active character and citizenship, stemming from a difference in first principles. Mill's philosopher does not share the Epicurean aim of untroubledness (*ataraxia*), and Mill accepts the demanding task of educating and regenerating a mass democratic society. Below, I assess Mill's *troubled hedonism*, that is, his acceptance of often intense and long-term mental perturbations, justified by a decidedly non-Epicurean social reform project.

**Keywords:** Liberalism; hedonism; social justice; sacrifice; Epicureanism; reform

In an important study, Frederick Rosen argues that liberal utilitarian J. S. Mill is a “modern Epicurean.”<sup>1</sup> This observation is a welcome change from the general tendency to bracket or ignore Mill's writings on Epicureanism.<sup>2</sup> Typically, when scholars return to Mill and the ancients, they focus on Mill's Socratism.<sup>3</sup> The image of Mill as a courageous, skeptical, Socratic inquirer in full possession of his own self-developed character

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarians from Hume to Mill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 15–28, 166–84; Frederick Rosen, Epicureanism and the Enlightenment, in *America and Enlightenment Constitutionalism*, ed. Gary L. McDowell and Johnathan O'Neill (New York and Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 81–98 (pp. 83–86). For discussion of Rosen, see David Lyons, Review of Rosen's *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*, *Utilitas*, 18, 2 (2006), 173–81; and Rosen's response, *Epicureanism and Utilitarianism: A Reply to Professor Lyons*, *Utilitas* 18.2 (2006): 182–87.

<sup>2</sup>Exceptions are Geoffrey Scarre, *Utilitarianism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 39–47; Frederick Vaughan, *The Tradition of Political Hedonism: From Hobbes to J. S. Mill* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982). For Lucretius, see James H. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>For astute discussions of Mill's Socratism, see Antis Loizides, *John Stuart Mill's Platonic Heritage: Happiness through Character* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); *John Stuart Mill: A British Socrates*, ed. by Kyriakos N. Demetriou and Antis Loizides (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Robert Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism: J. S. Mill's Use of Ancient, Religious, Liberal, and Romantic Moralities* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); and Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 59–124.

has long appealed to readers wishing to read Mill as a thinker standing up for the individual against the pressures of society and the routinization of life in modern, post-industrial states.<sup>4</sup> To this figure, Rosen and other scholars add an Epicurean Mill whose

emphasis on tranquility of spirit finds its external manifestation in security of persons and property, and a freedom to act as one pleases without causing harm to others. The double helix of justice and liberty from which ideas of the social contract, utility, economic development, and progress emerge is at the heart of modern Epicureanism.<sup>5</sup>

Is Mill a modern Epicurean of this description? Not in any obvious sense. Mill and the adjective “tranquil” are not clear matches. The very real Epicurean commitment to individual therapeutic freedom from fear is also not an obvious fit with Mill the disciple of utilitarianism. In philosophical terms, the problem can be expressed in Sidgwickian language: the psychological hedonism of Epicurus (that each seeks his own happiness) is opposed to the ethical hedonism of the Benthamic utilitarians (that each ought to seek the general happiness).<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I examine Mill’s ethical hedonism to assess whether it is importantly different from Epicurean hedonism. In order to understand both positions better, and especially to explore the limits and costs of ethical hedonism’s reforming attitude – surely one of the dominant attitudes in today’s ethical marketplace, at least in comparison to Epicureanism – it is helpful to revisit Mill and his Epicurean borrowings, and to review the places where he diverges from Epicurean principles.

## I. The aim of a Mill–Epicurus comparison

A. A. Long has argued that the similarities between Epicureanism and utilitarianism justify the characterization of Epicurus as a precursor of Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick; however, for Long, Epicurus is more rigorous in refusing to transition from psychological to ethical commitments to general happiness, even at the expense of individual happiness.<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Scarre concedes that Epicureans are devoted to *ataraxia*, or leading an untroubled life with tranquil peace of mind, free of the mental perturbations that plague reformers and do-gooders. However, utilitarians “cannot favour the search

<sup>4</sup>In some recent scholarship, Mill’s defense of selective imperial control of foreign dependencies is connected to his defense of high and harmonious character development and mental culture in a democratic age. See, for example, Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 77–114. In these readings, Mill’s attention to character creates an “outside” or “other” that is disadvantaged by his approach. Thus, a progressive social theory such as Mill’s (or Kant’s or Hegel’s) privileges some geographic locations and invokes a “civilizational ladder” that leaves some peoples and societies in the “waiting room” of history. The waiting room image is in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 8. See also Inder S. Marwah, *Liberalism, Diversity and Domination: Kant, Mill and the Government of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>Rosen, Epicureanism and the Enlightenment, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup>Henry Sidgwick, Preface to the Sixth Edition, in *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1930), pp. xiv–xxi (xv); Roger Crisp, *The Cosmos of Duty: Henry Sidgwick’s Methods of Ethics* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2015), pp. 1, 70–75, 203–4.

<sup>7</sup>A. A. Long, Epicureanism and Utilitarianism, in *Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism*, ed. by Phillip Mitsis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 742–60.

for ataractic containment.” “[T]rue utilitarians” must “deplore” caring “only about one’s own serenity,” considering it to be “moral solipsism.”<sup>8</sup>

Epicureans, for their part, must denounce quixotic projects of self-development and the development and reform of others’ lives, and the pursuit of transformed social conditions that will allow a more perfect achievement of social justice, insofar as these are causes of excessive hope and unnecessary fear, based on false opinions (*kenodoxia*) about uncertain future states.

For both groups, the stakes are very high: If the Epicureans are wrong, they risk acting unjustly in spite of their concern for justice. If the Millians are wrong, they risk acting in an irrational, albeit possibly prosocial manner.

By way of a practical example, consider the many letters that Jeremy Bentham wrote petitioning political leaders, inviting them to reform representative bodies, create humane and cost-conscious prisons, or even to deploy amphibious assault vehicles in times of war. These projects turn on the reasonableness of the duty to consider the happiness of others as part of one’s own happiness. The care and hard work that goes into these projects is alien to Epicureans, who, in pursuit of untroubled coexistence with like-minded people, secede from the city and form their own self-governing community without politics or *polis*, without *demos* and self-rule, without ruling and being ruled.

Before proceeding further, it is worth clearing up an initial confusion over the status of politics: Are Epicureans a-political or anti-political? The Epicureans prioritize purgative therapy, removing false opinions (*kenodoxia*) that are the source of mental perturbation (*tarakhē*).<sup>9</sup> For Epicureans, “most of the psychological perturbations that afflict us depend on empty or erroneous beliefs and can be eradicated entirely,” not by exercising political agency but by refusing it.<sup>10</sup> Political labors are Sisyphean.<sup>11</sup> Responding to the limits of political action, the Epicureans come up with two socio-political imperatives: *Lathe biōsas*, or, live unnoticed (and outside the domain of political persecution); and *mē politeuesthai* (do not participate in politics).<sup>12</sup> To rephrase their point in a different way, for the Epicureans politics is a form of busyboddiness (*polypragmosynē*) and the ataraxic life is one of minding one’s own business (*apragmosynē*).<sup>13</sup>

Epicureans are thus anti-political but not a-political. They advocate for social and political abstention, and recenter happy lives within alternate communities. Their anti-politics, or counter-cultural politics, are enacted outside of the city and in a smaller scope, and with greater agreement and trust concerning first principles.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Scarre, *Utilitarianism*, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>James Warren, Removing Fears, in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 234–48 (235).

<sup>10</sup>Konstan, Epicurean Happiness: A Pig’s Life? *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 6.1 (2012), 1–22 (13).

<sup>11</sup>Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), p. 95.

<sup>12</sup>Epicurus, Fragments, in *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, trans. and ed. by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), pp. 106–39 (139). For discussion, see Geert Roskam, *Live Unnoticed: On the Vicissitudes of an Epicurean Doctrine* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007).

<sup>13</sup>See discussion in A. W. H. Adkins, *Polupragmosune* and ‘Minding One’s Own Business’: A Study in Greek Social and Political Values, *Classical Philology* 71, 4 (1976), 301–27 (301).

<sup>14</sup>For example, Eric Brown, Politics and Society, in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 179–96 (pp. 179–80, 195–96); Jeffrey Green, Solace for the Frustrations of Silent Citizenship: The Case of Epicureanism, *Citizenship Studies* 19.5 (2015), 492–506 (494). Roskam, *Live Unnoticed*, pp. 1–28, uses “apolitical” to mean unnoticed rather than outside of the city.

For Mill, in contrast, politics brings pleasures of recognition and reputation, “sweetening” the inevitable pains of active political agency in what Mill calls a “religion of humanity,” which is in part based on the reformer’s sympathy with an expanding pool of fellow humans.<sup>15</sup> Mill recognizes that politically active lives may end in disappointment in “this world of unfinished beginnings, unrealised promises, and disappointed endeavours.”<sup>16</sup> However, if the goal of political reform is illusory, and “better than the truth,” it is not for that reason a delusion, according to Mill.<sup>17</sup> Mill, in other words, is political. He remains in the ambit of the “dominant ideology” of the ancient world, agreeing with Plato and Aristotle that a reformed version of the *polis* is the *sine qua non* of happiness and freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Mill disagrees with polity reimagined at Epicurean scale. As he explains, “the feeling of unity with our fellow creatures shall be ... as deeply rooted in our character, and to our own consciousness as completely a part of our nature, as the horror of crime is in an ordinarily well-brought up young person.”<sup>19</sup> The *extent* of this feeling of unity is the entire human race, not just the fellow-travelers in the Epicurean garden. And although Mill recognizes that “differences of opinion and of mental culture [with other humans] make it impossible for him to share many of their actual feelings – perhaps make him denounce and defy those feelings,” the philosophical reformer is not dissuaded from reform because fellow-feeling and consensus are presently lacking.<sup>20</sup> Mill, then, both asserts the justice of socially useful action, and recognizes a lack of intellectual and moral congruence between those helped and those who are helping. And he finds that politics is deeply rooted in the English mind, and connected via empire, education, civilization, and flourishing.

One could argue that both positions are liberatory, even if they disagree on the importance and meaning of politics. Benthamite utilitarianism liberates societies from complacency, conservatism, and aristocratic exclusion.<sup>21</sup> Arising in the Hellenistic age of empires, Epicureanism offers an alternative therapy for social classes excluded from politics. Below, my comparison of Mill and Epicurus shows that both do more than liberate individuals from civic exclusion. They offer attractive, transformative, if conflicting ways of life to their adherents.

For the purposes of this comparison, I restrict my attention to Epicurus (341–270 BCE) and his first-century BCE interpreter, Lucretius, when judging whether Mill’s form of dignified, troubled liberalism should count as modern Epicureanism, neo-Epicureanism, or non-Epicureanism.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this article, I define a

<sup>15</sup>My thanks to the journal’s anonymous reviewers for making the range of interpretations of a hedonically based active political life clearer to me, and for many other helpful suggestions. See Section V below for the limits of sympathetic identification with the happiness of others.

<sup>16</sup>Mill, *Diary of 1854*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. by John Robson, 33 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963–91), XXVII (1988), 639–68 (654). (All references to Mill’s writings are to *The Collected Works*.)

<sup>17</sup>Mill, *Diary of 1854*, XXVII, 642.

<sup>18</sup>Eric Brown, *False Idles: The Politics of the “Quiet Life,”* in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. by Ryan Balot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 485–500.

<sup>19</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X (1969), 203–59 (227).

<sup>20</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 233.

<sup>21</sup>Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 58–59 n. 3.

<sup>22</sup>Knut Haakonssen, Introduction, in *Adam Smith: Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. vii–xxiv, explains the neo-Epicurean position, which he attributes to Hobbes,

troubled hedonist in Millian terms as a reformer committed to the relief of man's physical state – indigence, disease, early death, and the other ills listed in “Utilitarianism” – and to the relief of human mis-education – the unhappiness-producing state of contemporary education, which in Mill's view contributes to unnecessary mental suffering.<sup>23</sup> In making my comparison, I hope to shed some light on a broader philosophical question raised by Henry Sidgwick: Can ethical hedonists reconcile interest and duty on rational grounds, or must reformers such as Mill substitute a practical standard that will work in a pinch, but not be “final for philosophy”?<sup>24</sup>

## II. *Ataraxia* in the Epicureans

Epicureans do not have projects, per se. They do not engage in the labor-intensive, socially useful project of advancing science and the arts, including the art of governing, that are at the heart of the modern project. Their reform attempts are presented as education, and even as mental liberation, but not as the result of principled social duty, and they are limited in amplitude to the self-selecting group that seeks out this sort of mental purgative.<sup>25</sup> Their way of life does not involve active political service, and in fact rejects political participation, officeholding, and other aspects of political life that Bentham and other utilitarians embrace. For the purposes of this comparison, I consider two commitments, personal freedom and friendship, with the emphasis on the former.

### a. *Personal Freedom*

In his core writings, Epicurus defines the desire for pleasure according to whether a desire is rational to have. As Epicurus has it, “[w]e must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life.”<sup>26</sup> Desires that are natural and necessary are those that sustain life, such as the desire for food and drink. Desires that are natural and unnecessary are those desires that aim at unnecessary gratification in the satisfaction of the natural desires – for example, the desire for food that is rich and sweet, or for

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Gassendi, Pufendorf, Mandeville, and Hume. Morality is a human contrivance designed to “control or regulate self-interest,” based in “agreements or contracts to set up political institutions to reinforce the rules of morality” (p. xi). Mill argues in “Utilitarianism” that a sense of moral duty is acquired, yet still natural (X, 230).

<sup>23</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 216.

<sup>24</sup>Sidgwick, *Preface to the Sixth Edition*, p. xvi. This article sticks with Epicurus and Mill because Sidgwick moves beyond hedonism into a “moral government of the world” (p. xx). It is interesting to examine how Mill fares without this assumption.

<sup>25</sup>Unlike Anglo-American interpreters, Pierre Hadot denies that Epicurean happiness is egoistic happiness (*bonheur égoïste*) and instead describes it as consisting in the happiness of “small, faithful communities” who possess the knowledge of how to enjoy existence. See Pierre Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*, trans. by Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 191, 202, 272–73.

<sup>26</sup>Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, in *Epicurus*, pp. 94–105 (pp. 101–3). See also Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, in *Epicurus*, pp. 83–93 (87). See also *Principal Doctrines*, pp. 103–5, and *Fragments*, p. 117, for justice. For a powerful statement rejecting beauty insofar as it is not pleasurable, and embracing justice because it produces untroubledness, see *Fragments*, pp. 137–39. See also Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), pp. 251, 263 on necessary and unnecessary pleasures and desires.

(excessive) sexual gratification. Desires, finally, that are unnatural and unnecessary are those vain desires that do not correspond to any real desire that it is within our control to satisfy. For example, the love of fame, the desire for immortality, and the pursuit of great wealth are unnatural and unnecessary.

Epicurus' celebration of freedom ultimately aligns with other Epicurean values such as self-rule (*autarkeia*) and prudence (*phronēsis*) that, in this reading, justify the Epicurean commitment to untroubledness. The Epicurean is untroubled because mentally free from what Mill calls the "despotism of custom," and this permits the rational, guiltless pursuit of further pleasures.<sup>27</sup> In practice, Epicurean self-sufficiency brings with it the proper, practical relation to food and drink, honor, and the opposite sex, and carries with it the proper relation to chance. It is easy to surround yourself with the things necessary for life, the Epicureans argue. A moderate person can be free from the vulgar dependence on the goddess fortune and live well even if they are born into straitened socioeconomic conditions.<sup>28</sup> In sum, then, desires must be subject to intense criticism; they must be under our control (*par'hēmas*).

### b. Friendship and civic demotion

Whereas Stoics are cosmopolitan, which implies both a generality of connection to others, and also a normative stance concerning the type of orderly politics that is desirable, Epicureans are at most para-political. Their garden is outside of the city but connected to cities from which they receive money, and to whose Epicurean citizens they give money, and most importantly by which they are protected under the same geopolitical umbrella.<sup>29</sup> In the garden one finds a self-selected group of friends, because – crucially – although a happy life is available to everyone, enjoying it must be left to education and choice rather than accidents of birth. Friendship is not, then, defined by accidents of birth or civic inclusion, à la Aristotle's political friendship; friendship is instead defined by those with whom you can agree on the principles of a happy life.

Some scholars argue that the Epicurean community of sages counts as a political community. Epicureans obey justice under a voluntary contract, and require the protection of nearby communities. They are outside of Athens' city walls but not beyond its shadow, similar to present-day "seasteading" communities located in international waters near semi-tolerant states.<sup>30</sup> The garden also relies on Epicurus' family wealth and property, voluntary contributions from Epicureans and their supporters in other Greek cities, and on assessments levied on supporters.<sup>31</sup> However this may be, the Epicurean withdrawal from the politics of the city should be understood as a denial that the *polis* is the site of civic self-fulfillment, or flourishing.

## III. Mill's ataraxic borrowings

The Millian hedonistic way of life lacks the Epicurean imperative commands not to participate in politics (*mē politeuesthai*) and to live quietly or silently (*Lathe biōsas*).

<sup>27</sup>Mill, *On Liberty*, XVIII (1977), 213–310 (272). For Epicurus on prudence and honor and justice, see Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, p. 95; *Letter to Menoecus*, pp. 89–91; and *Fragments*, p. 109.

<sup>28</sup>See Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, pp. 101–3; *Fragments*, pp. 107, 109, 133, 137–39.

<sup>29</sup>Diskin Clay, *The Athenian Garden*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 9–28.

<sup>30</sup>Brown, *Politics and Society*, pp. 195–96.

<sup>31</sup>Clay, *The Athenian Garden*, p. 16.

However, Mill and the Epicureans share several overlapping commitments connected to personal freedom: the cultivation of active character; the demotion of erotic love and other pleasures called “kinetic” by the Epicureans; and a degree of criticism of revealed or traditional religion. Below, bracketing revealed religion and erotic love, I focus on Mill’s Epicurean commitment to personal freedom, heroism, and criticism of hedonistic piggishness.<sup>32</sup>

In his “Autobiography” and “System of Logic,” Mill argues that the partial freedom to form our own character, which Mill calls the “doctrine of circumstances,” amounts to a “real power.” It is defended across Mill’s writings. We cannot choose our character *simpliciter*, but we may choose the circumstances in which our character is formed.<sup>33</sup> Mill therefore thinks that in the long term, we can choose to have a prosocial character in response to prosocial incentives, lending these incentives the same intensity as more “personal” motives.<sup>34</sup> This commitment is the one questioned by A. A. Long, and preferred to the Epicurean approach by Scarre.

Mill doesn’t require or even expect heroism in a liberal polity, although he does remark that refusing to help others is punishable “in grave cases.”<sup>35</sup> As the young Mill writes in “Civilization” (1836), a text inflected by the influence of Thomas Carlyle and ancient republicanism, “when it is necessary not to bear pain but to seek it, little needs be expected from the men of the present day.”<sup>36</sup> More broadly, for Mill something like primary small-group affiliation is a typical state of affairs. And yet in spite of, or probably because of this presumption, Mill also praises the exemplary life of risk and sacrifice, arguing that the willingness to undergo ultimate sacrifice for the greater good is “the highest virtue which can be found in man.”<sup>37</sup>

Modern moral exemplars can aid in the production of admiration of virtue, and thus advance social utility. Examples include Harriet Taylor, Mill’s wife, whom Mill sets up as a figure worthy of emulation in his famous epigraph to *On Liberty*; Turgot, as depicted in Condorcet’s *Life of Turgot*; ancient exemplars such as Socrates, Demosthenes, and Pericles; and Jesus Christ as a historical figure of benevolent social morality. All of these figures are useful aids to the broader utilitarian project, in Mill’s view, reducing the need for social coercion by providing protreptic models to their admirers. Among these figures, Socrates serves as a key example, “the moral hero, still *tenax propositi* [firm of purpose] against the hostility and contempt of the world.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism*, pp. 114–62, interprets Mill’s morality as incoherently influenced by Christianity along with ancient Socratic *zētēsis* and modern Enlightenment commitments. For Timothy Larsen, *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), it remains Christian. Unlike the Epicureans (and Aristotle and Plato), Mill does not write extensively about friendship, and when he does his focus remains on socially useful intellectual friendships. See Chris Barker, *Educating Liberty: Democracy and Aristocracy in J. S. Mill’s Political Thought* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018), pp. 39–43.

<sup>33</sup>Mill, *Autobiography*, I (1981), 1–290 (177).

<sup>34</sup>Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, X (1969), 261–368 (310).

<sup>35</sup>Mill, *On Liberty*, XVIII, 279; cf. 225 on evil done by inaction; and Brian McElwee, Mill on Virtue, in *A Companion to Mill*, ed. by Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller (Malden, MA, and Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), pp. 390–406 (398). (Hereafter, *CM*.)

<sup>36</sup>Mill, *Civilization*, XVIII (1977), 117–47 (131).

<sup>37</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 217.

<sup>38</sup>Mill, *The Gorgias*, XI (1978), 97–150 (149); Mill, Grote’s *Plato*, XI, 375–440 (416). Socrates’ moral heroism partly explains the aforementioned association of Mill with Socratism.



Recent Mill scholarship suggests that we can understand Mill's hedonism better by thinking of it as a preference for one among several competing *ways of life*.<sup>39</sup> The life that is lived through a Nozickian experience machine is superficial and arid, foreclosing life's complex goods. Other ways of life are more agentic, and, to assess their worth, choosers should compare complete ways of life, not individual instances of high or low pleasures, whether in bad moments such as being burned alive for political activity or freethinking, or in good (pleasant) ones.

In "Utilitarianism," Mill famously offers a choice between two lives, the unthinking swine or Socrates' life. The famous, almost forced choice – act like Socrates or like a swine – is an effective rhetorical contrast designed to persuade the reader to accept a public-spirited life, yet in offering it Mill threatens to misrepresent his argument, which contrasts four more or less defensible lives: (1) the Socratic "examined" life, which Mill further subdivides into two types of contemplative life, (a) (the life of) inquiry into inquiry alone, which Mill calls logic, or the art of thinking, or the "science of science itself," whose sole aim is the "guidance of one's thoughts," and (b) thinking that results in public-spirited action;<sup>40</sup> (2) the Epicurean life, subdivided into (a) the apolitical and cautiously selfish life devoted to higher therapeutic pursuits promoting individual freedom; and (b) the life of the hedonist seeking satisfaction in food, drink, and sex.

The higher Epicurean life, and the lower "eat, drink, and be merry" life, are very different lives. This article argues that the two different versions of the examined life – the "logical" life and the life of troubled scholarly prosocial engagement – are also very different. The "high" Epicurean philosopher's life is akin to the logician's life but unlike the logician the Epicurean does not necessarily contribute to the progress of scientific inquiry.<sup>41</sup>

Elizabeth Asmis has argued that the Epicureans refine the inductive method and do not just borrow it from their atomistic precursors, meaning that the higher Epicurean life has a theoretical, and not just a therapeutic, project.<sup>42</sup> If it is important for Epicureans to contribute to progress in the sciences, then the Epicurean life of *scientific* freedom might look much more like the familiar (and painfully laborious) scholarly life spent in the process of refining method and accumulating knowledge. In this reading, the Epicurean life shades into a Kuhnian life of advancing knowledge within a given paradigm. However, the typical Epicurean tools of philosophy are collective study, pedagogy, and memorization.<sup>43</sup> Epicureanism does not explore and complete an evolving Epicurean reason of life (*ratio vitae*); instead, Epicureans remember their principles, practice them, and transmit them to others.

<sup>39</sup>Guy Fletcher, Mill's Art of Life, in *CM*, pp. 297–312; Ben Saunders, Mill's Conception of Happiness, in *CM*, pp. 313–27 (319); Dale E. Miller, J. S. Mill: *Moral, Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), pp. 65–66; David O. Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), p. 51.

<sup>40</sup>Mill, Letter to John Sterling, XII (1963), 74–88 (79); A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive, VII, 6. There are nuances of context and rhetorical strategy, as well as a thirty-year time gap, separating the early letter to Sterling and "Utilitarianism."

<sup>41</sup>J. M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 14–17.

<sup>42</sup>Elizabeth Asmis, *Epicurus' Scientific Method* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>43</sup>Voula Tsouna also adds "moral portraiture," an understudied Epicurean tool reminding us of Mill's figures of Condorcet, Socrates, and Harriet Taylor Mill. See Voula Tsouna, Epicurean Therapeutic Strategies, in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 249–65 (262).



Is such a life refined swinishness, as Thomas Carlyle argues, who further argues that humans “can do without happiness”?<sup>44</sup> Mill seems to agree with Carlyle, paradoxically asserting the value of the “conscious ability to do without happiness,” parallel to Carlyle’s *entsagen*, or renunciation. However, Mill argues in the *Autobiography* that Carlyle’s view of *entsagen* is acceptable to him only if it serves to “increase the amount of happiness in the world.”<sup>45</sup> Mill’s theory is not Carlylean. Mill’s theory can be described in this way: the happy life is generally available in moments of tranquillity; in occasional moments of excitement; in care for others; in mental cultivation; and in the promise of overcoming poverty and disease – provided that all of this activity serves the common benefit. This common benefit is the hedonic object of the utilitarian. Apostrophizing this object, Rosen concludes that “no other morality contained a greater degree of nobility and exaltation of the spirit than utilitarianism.”<sup>46</sup> And, for Rosen, Mill makes possible a “new kind of utilitarian hero who embraced sacrifice but ... did not renounce happiness.”<sup>47</sup> This is the image of the troubled utilitarian “reformer of the world” who presupposes that individual happiness is necessarily connected to collective happiness.<sup>48</sup> But is there not a tradeoff, as there obviously seems to be and as Sidgwick notes, between personal freedom and collective happiness?

Mill has already clarified his views on the internal tension between utility and nobility in his criticisms of Bentham’s *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.<sup>49</sup> Bentham’s flawed philosophical anthropology underestimates key features of a normatively demanding account of human sociability, such as values of conscience, dignity, and self-respect, each of which have a place in a *qualitative* hedonic calculus (or way of life) that is irreducible to quantitative weighing of pleasures. “None of these powerful constituents of human nature are thought worthy of a place among the ‘Springs of Action,’” Mill writes, implicitly agreeing with Carlyle’s negative point against Benthamic utility, although emphatically not with Carlyle’s own assertions about blessedness, race, gender, tradition, custom, monasticism, or mysticism. Ever the empiricist, Mill is not claiming to be more idealistic than Bentham in Mill’s defense of conscience and dignity, but the opposite. “Man, that most complex being,” Mill complains of Bentham, “is a very simple one in his eyes.”<sup>50</sup>

For the purposes of this article, we can simply observe that Bentham fails to reflect upon his own public spirit and prosocial energy. Mill’s devastating point against Bentham – and James Mill, at the time of his “Essay on Government” – is not that the organization of self-interested individuals under an interest-junction-principle is flawed, but that Bentham and James Mill do not properly understand that actual humans think that their actual self-interest is caught up in service, duty, honor, nation, creed, or, as Mill puts it, self-respect. Mill’s politics is in this sense, at least, a “politics of respectability,” and for Mill this is a more realistic politics. Is this politics of realistic idealism consistent with personal freedom?

<sup>44</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2030), p. 231. Mill’s analysis of swinishness and dignity are found in Mill, *Diary of 1854*, XXVII, 663, and *Utilitarianism*, X, 212.

<sup>45</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 217.

<sup>46</sup>Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism*, p. 184.

<sup>47</sup>Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism*, p. 183.

<sup>48</sup>Mill, *Autobiography*, I, 137.

<sup>49</sup>Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007).

<sup>50</sup>Bentham, *Introduction*, pp. 95–96.

As with Rosen (and other interpreters), and also for Mill, the progressive moral conscience draws us into the political arena, there to take an active part in creating the conditions of political and social justice.<sup>51</sup> This sense of dignity, or self-respect, may be experienced as indignant discontent, as a sense of being troubled by human griefs that you can help to overcome, but it is hard to square with pacific disengagement in the face of suffering.<sup>52</sup> The anger of Mill's 1854 diary at the prospect of his wife's death is a case in point, illustrating the dissatisfactions of the reformer confronting problems of scope – the people who are being benefited fail to recognize and praise their benefactors – and temporality – life ends before the good work is done.<sup>53</sup> Mill's famous mental crisis of 1826–27, as recounted in Chapter 5 of the *Autobiography*, is another example where the conflict between individual interest and duty is dramatized.

Carlyle's criticism of utilitarianism is thus very off-base, insofar as the core of utilitarianism – perhaps for Bentham, and clearly for Mill and Rosen – is a covert or outright commitment to noble service and even to sacrifice.

There is an additional point of confusion potentially worth noting. Mill argues that poetry offers “permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation,” and he argues this claim as an alternative to the restless life devoted to improving others. This is poetry as therapy.<sup>54</sup> This claim is sometimes interpreted as a sign of Mill's incoherent expressivism, as if Mill becomes confused over the truth-value of his claims about the good life by his appreciation for *feeling* truths as opposed to knowing them.<sup>55</sup> Ignoring his rhetorical exaggeration (“permanent happiness”), Mill's point is better understood as a realistic one: the world (and death, and suffering, and accident and chance) are upsetting to humans, and focusing on the human goods provides a therapy for fears and disappointments, just as the fine arts provided therapy during his mental crisis. Ancient poetry – Virgil's *Georgics* or Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* – has a similar function. For Lucretius as for Mill, poetry is honey *rimming the cup* of wormwood, not a new mixture and not an end in itself.

#### IV. Mill's key deviations from *ataraxia*

Above, we introduced the possibility of “higher” ways of life that are more engaged and cooperative and socially just, and lives that are more scientific, and disengaged. Where does the ataraxic way of life fit in?<sup>56</sup>

Surprisingly, Mill concedes that the Epicureans “have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground [of human dignity], *with entire consistency*” in order to make their argument for mental pleasures.<sup>57</sup> This is confusing praise. If they have made their case and it is entirely consistent to take the “higher ground,” shouldn't it be equally logically consistent to *join the Epicureans* on the lower, more solid ground that mental pleasures are less costly, and more

<sup>51</sup>Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, pp. 36–37, 44.

<sup>52</sup>See Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 22, 188, 198, 200; see also pp. 15–16, 53, for dignity versus swinishness.

<sup>53</sup>Mill, *Diary of 1854*, XXVII, 654. To be clear, this is not a merely biographical point. The diary is the product of an obligation to think useful thoughts. See *Diary of 1854*, XXVII, 641.

<sup>54</sup>Mill, *Autobiography*, I, 153.

<sup>55</sup>Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism*, pp. 161, 164, 186–90, 221, 223–24.

<sup>56</sup>Compare Mitsis, *Epicurus' Ethical Theory*, pp. 29–32 for observations on the hedonic calculus; and p. 36 and context for needs and desires.

<sup>57</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 211 (emphasis added).

permanent and safer to access? If so, we can infer that the life spent seeking mental pleasures is superior to the lower life in terms of reliability and duration, without relying on the justification provided by Millian dignity (that mental pleasures are more noble). But if so, then why valorize the dignity of the troubled life? Why not join the Epicureans in their therapeutic abstention from care, when one is safe on the shore and a mere spectator to the sufferings of those at sea?<sup>58</sup>

The explanation Mill provides is that other elements, Stoic and Christian, must be added to make Epicureanism persuasive to the dignified person.<sup>59</sup> In so arguing, Mill acknowledges a challenge to his own theory: why choose dignity? As Mill observes when he is interpreting Plato, it is “impossible, by any arguments, to prove that a life of obedience to duty is preferable, so far as respects the agent himself, to a life of circumspect and cautious selfishness.”<sup>60</sup> The cautious, selfish way of life he refers to is the Epicurean life, and this admission – if he maintains it in his mature years – weakens the argument of “Utilitarianism.” For obvious reasons, the life of cautious selfishness may not aid, and may even impede, Millian progress. This way of life creates coordination problems, allowing a form of free-riding for those who choose the garden over the city, Atticus’ indifferent Athens over Cicero’s republican and public-spirited Rome.

At the end of the “Diary of 1854,” Mill suggests that what is needed in his day is to begin with the “creed of Epicurus warmed by the additional element of an enthusiastic love of the general good.”<sup>61</sup> That is, the Epicurean therapeutic focus on individual freedom, combined with (for example) Athenian democratic public spirit as advanced through oratory, is the proper toolkit of late modern citizenship.<sup>62</sup> Whether this is feasible, possible, and desirable as a way of life is a crucial question. Perhaps Bentham’s felicific calculus can be broadened to include springs of action that recognize the nobility of political engagement. This is how Sidgwick reads Mill, and he finds himself disappointed: “that kind of [self-sacrificing] hero, however admirable, was certainly not a philosopher.”<sup>63</sup> In order to justify this way of life as constructive rather than self-sacrificial, one might point to the fruits of civilization, which an increasingly large number of us can and should enjoy, including the reformer. The evidence of progress, and that a growing “extent” of persons can enjoy human progress, is before Mill’s eyes – although so too is suffering, industrial semi-enslavement, and continued gendered domination. Moreover, this answer dodges the question of whether my happiness is necessarily connected to the general happiness.

Mill also importantly theorizes the desire for “consideration,” which he characterizes at one point as “the principle object of human pursuit.”<sup>64</sup> The politics of recognition, and the religion of humanity on which it relies, marks an important difference between Mill’s and the Epicurean theory.<sup>65</sup> The development of a religion of humanity

<sup>58</sup>Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, pp. 35–36. Presumably, the “ship of state” metaphor is intended here.

<sup>59</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 211.

<sup>60</sup>Mill, “Gorgias,” XI, 149.

<sup>61</sup>Mill, *Diary of 1854*, XXVII, 666.

<sup>62</sup>Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 125; pp. 131, 132 n. 10. The organic unity of the people generates the “warmth” of Greek direct democracy. Classical warmth is fed by oratory (*Rede*). The modern morality of justice is predicated on each individual’s thinking of herself as both sovereign and subject (pp. 131, 145).

<sup>63</sup>Sidgwick, *Preface to the Sixth Edition*, p. xvi.

<sup>64</sup>Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, XXI (1984), 259–340 (272).

<sup>65</sup>Mill, *Utility of Religion*, X, 420.

guarantees the pleasure of recognition and the reward of praise to practitioners of a self-sacrificing utilitarian heroism, which for this reason is less sacrificial. But scratch the surface of this solution, and similar problems to the limits of sympathy are apparent: society may honor the wrong person, or in the wrong proportion; forget about the right person; or misidentify the rational saint as opposed to the popular person.

However Mill works these vexing problems out, his is not an Epicurean project. Epicureans are presentists, not progressivists, in their conception of temporality. A reminder or a performative test of this is the Epicurean poem, *On the Nature of Things*. The poem is cataclysmic. It ends with the destruction of the political unit, Athens, in a plague that is often analyzed as a political allegory for the necessary incompleteness of the civic project.<sup>66</sup> As a natural event, the plague presents a clear limit to the aim of political ambition. Mill, for his part, disagrees. Speaking of and within the rhetorical borders of his religion of humanity, Mill calls progress “indefinite”: the duration of our projects is “practically equivalent to endlessness,” and our capacity to improve is “indefinite.”<sup>67</sup> There is no natural plague to press social reset, and no “plague’ of *kenodoxia*,” either.<sup>68</sup> In sum, although we ourselves are finite, our plans and projects are not.<sup>69</sup>

As noted, this is a fundamentally different conception of temporality from the Epicureans’, for whom “the present alone is our happiness.”<sup>70</sup> Progressivism is not incompatible with respect for the present moment’s happiness, just as service to the whole human community is not incompatible (in some utilitarian accounts) with small-group commitments. But Epicurean presentism is not compatible with progressivism. Still, we cannot tell what Epicurus would say about his own theory were he alive today. There is at most a “concrete attitude” associated with any school of thought. The Epicurean attitude is one of “welcoming the present.”<sup>71</sup> Epicureans stake their claims on an alternative temporal horizon to the progressive’s temporal horizon. We can therefore say with some safety that they would reject the asymptotic approximation of an unachievable social standard, whether it is Kant’s crooked-timber progressivism or Mill’s religion of humanity.

#### V. Reasons for Mill’s deviations

Above, we observed that Mill claims that the philosopher should begin with an Epicurean foundation, and then add other elements. Why does Mill introduce these non-Epicurean elements? Mill is unwilling simply to dismiss the importance of either individual happiness or social welfare, but he conscientiously disagrees with the Epicureans as to the main problem to be overcome by education. The main pedagogical problem of his time is not individual release from vain hopes and false fears, but

<sup>66</sup>Fortification, settled division of lands, navigation, treaty-making, poetic songs of renown, and “all the prizes and all the luxuries of life” are achieved as humans ascend to the pinnacle of the arts (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, p. 176), but that does not stop the cataclysm (i.e., the plague, p. 206–11).

<sup>67</sup>Mill, *Utility of Religion*, X, 420.

<sup>68</sup>Monica R. Gale, Lucretius, in *Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism*, ed. by Phillip Mitsis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 430–55 (435).

<sup>69</sup>Mill, *Utility of Religion*, X, 420.

<sup>70</sup>Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is our Happiness*, 2nd ed., trans. Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>71</sup>Hadot, *The Present Alone is our Happiness*, pp. 68–69. But see Tsouna, *Epicurean Therapeutic Strategies*, p. 260, for the pleasures of remembering the past and anticipating the future.

teaching individuals to shoulder their social duties, as befits the modern morality of equal justice.

Mill rejects sacrifice for its own sake while defending – and using the moral terminology of – the type of noble sacrifice that is beautiful because instrumentally useful to achieve a socially useful outcome.<sup>72</sup> It is therefore reasonable to think, as republican views of Mill hold, that there is a civic and participatory element in Mill's liberal individualism. Mill approves of the idea that the citizen "is made to feel himself one of the public," and he bluntly asserts that "[w]here this school of public spirit does not exist, scarcely any sense is entertained that private persons... owe any duties to society, except to obey the laws."<sup>73</sup> It may ultimately be the case that Mill thinks that selfishness is so thorough that human sociability needs significant prosocial help. While his educative project may offer a merely practical standard rather than a rational ground for utilitarianism's greatest happiness principle, it does not have to be methodologically unsophisticated. As with Sidgwick, Mill may be informed by an Aristotelian argument for reflective equilibrium between individual and social principles, connected to Socratic negative dialectics and Grotean dialectical democratic power, among other methods.<sup>74</sup>

In addition, there is Mill's religion of humanity. The religion of humanity is important to secure the pleasure of "consideration" to the wise. If the "religion of humanity" fails to make rewards for social service to the common good available to all, and especially to the most reform-minded, the Millian project fails. Thus, for A. A. Long, "Epicurus' move is hedonistically coherent whereas Mill's move is not."<sup>75</sup> Unlike Scarre (and Mill), however, Long defends Epicurus, finding that by taking "a long view of history," Epicurus sees the happiness of friends as crucially important, enough to make Epicurus a "virtual utilitarian." The prioritization of friendship over the city, with its wars and bloodshed, has its merits. Again, though, in this article's reading it is only by eliding the difference between friends with whom one agrees on basic principles and the whole of humanity that Epicurus can be made into a "virtual utilitarian." And, if one pushes the point, the "friendship" solution replicates the same interest-versus-duty problems we saw in the contradiction between individual and civic happiness.

It is possible that a completely different view of the ancient project is missing from Mill's account of character-formation, moral heroes notwithstanding. If the aim of ancient philosophical teaching is to form a group of disciples through exercises which put a school's method into practice, as Pierre Hadot argues, individual character-formation is what matters, not social utility.<sup>76</sup> Mill's moral heroes (Condorcet, a public-spirited Socrates, a manly Christ) are not models of this (Epicurean) sort. The Epicurean sage is himself a version of the Epicurean god: withdrawn, contented and

<sup>72</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 212–214. See 217: "It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it: but, after all, this self-sacrifice must be for some end."

<sup>73</sup>J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, XIX, 371–577 (412) and Wendy Donner, John Stuart Mill on Education and Democracy, in *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, ed. by Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 250–74 (263).

<sup>74</sup>For a "third perspective" of practical reason" that takes into account egoistic and utilitarian reasons, see Crisp, *The Cosmos of Duty*, p. 231.

<sup>75</sup>Long, *Epicureanism and Utilitarianism*.

<sup>76</sup>Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot*, pp. 55–62.

tranquil, separated and distant from our worries.<sup>77</sup> For Mill, if there is a god, the “virtuous human being” is a “fellow labourer” and “fellow combatant” with the god, not someone aspiring to the god’s tranquil, separate, non-interfering benevolence.<sup>78</sup> Mill’s language of work and combat, not of tranquility, is worth noting. It is the language of laborious social progress, an attitude that is absent from the Epicureans and largely absent from the ancient world.<sup>79</sup>

For all their focus on sages, Epicureans do not differ from Mill because they are elitists. Human “mental culture” is open to all, including slaves and women, although education is uneven and attainments vary.<sup>80</sup> The Millian philosopher possessing “public affections” similarly thinks that all persons are capable of mental advancement.<sup>81</sup> In modern times, the “mass of mankind” can combine “the main constituents of a satisfied life,” a combination of tranquility and excitement, in one life.<sup>82</sup> Money, fame, and political power can become “parts” of one’s happiness, as can higher reform projects.<sup>83</sup> These assumptions do not commit the Millian reformer to a pell-mell, revolutionary rush to improve the world. That is, the difference between Mill and the Epicureans is not that Mill’s philosopher is always on a crusade or grand civilizade. As A. A. Long importantly reminds us, adherence to the advancement of the whole – “so wide a generality as the world, or society at large” – is not a typical object of reform.<sup>84</sup> The scale of reform is usually more personal. But if we talk of those “one in a thousand” public benefactors, the “best and not the worst people” who have the power to do good on a global scale, it is not enough to rank them as unhappy reformers, as Mill sometimes does. Their happiness matters, and it is that happiness which Epicureans put under the therapeutic microscope.<sup>85</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

For Frederick Rosen, Mill ends up “slightly modifying Bentham but not the larger Epicurean tradition” in his reply to the anti-hedonistic criticisms of Thomas Carlyle.<sup>86</sup> A. A. Long pushes Epicurus in the utilitarian direction, and Scarre pushes his reader away from Epicurean selfishness in a more prosocial direction. Epicurus is thus made to join the protagonists of a modern democratic project, and share in the social hope described by authors such as Richard Rorty, John Dewey, and Walt Whitman. Mill shares these reformers’ hopes. While Mill was not temperamentally a democrat, and the low standard of education in his time dissuaded him from a democratic faith, he had high hopes for the general elevation of humanity, and argued that

<sup>77</sup>Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot*, p. 191, for Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, II. 646.

<sup>78</sup>Mill’s “theism of the imagination and feelings” may bring him closer to a Sidgwickian necessity of positing a “moral government” than either thinker might like. See Mill, *Utility of Religion*, X, 403–28 (426).

<sup>79</sup>For a competing interpretation, see Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967).

<sup>80</sup>Konstan, *Epicurean Happiness: A Pig’s Life?* The younger Mill is more confident in the mental cultivation of the masses: Mill, *Civilization*, XVIII, 124–26; see also *Diary of 1854*, XXVII, 645, 668 (we are “doomed to live in almost the infancy of human improvement”), and *Autobiography*, I, 239.

<sup>81</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 215.

<sup>82</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 215.

<sup>83</sup>Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 236; and Henry R. West, *The Proof*, in *CM*, pp. 328–41 (336).

<sup>84</sup>Long, *Epicureanism and Utilitarianism*; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, X, 220.

<sup>85</sup>Mill, *Diary of 1854*, XXVII, 660, and Mill, *Autobiography*, I, 139.

<sup>86</sup>Rosen, *Classical Utilitarians*, p. 183.



justice properly understood as general human emancipation and advancement can become part of an individual's own happiness.

Epicureans agree with Mill that all life is troubled, even in the garden, because the threat of painful death or privation generates rational fears. However, the Epicureans eschew sources of *unnecessary* mental trouble that result from the desire to achieve political honor, wealth, and fame. Unlike hunger, disease, or accident, such pains are neither natural nor necessary. As for the painful ambitions of the social reformer, or the scarce pleasures of rewards within a "religion of humanity," the Epicureans would probably describe the discontent of the public-spirited philosopher as an absurd choice to wriggle on the hook of their own imagining. Mill and the Epicureans agree on the importance of education. However, Epicurean education consists primarily in the removal of unnecessary perturbations in a closed, withdrawn school setting – indoctrination against false fears and false hopes. Indefinite social progress is one of those hopes, one which Mill seems to understand and accept as an "illusion" but absolutely not a "delusion."

For Mill, in contrast, not only is the life of troubled service and labor valuable, it is precisely what is missing in the Epicurean doctrine. The Epicurean doctrine must be "warmed" by "enthusiastic love of the general good," although Mill stops short of advocating Comtist altruism, Carlylean renunciation, or pointless sacrifice. The best of us have duties to the good of "that larger country, the world," and even the average citizen is "not a good man" if he does not "trouble his mind" about the foreign policy decisions made in his name.<sup>87</sup> Once this more sympathetic and socially connected and cooperative understanding of human flourishing is achieved, through the mere interaction with others in business and society, and also through education and discipline, training and restraint, a civilized society will emerge where all are burdened by requirements to sacrifice for the sake of a more "perfect co-operation." This is what it is to be civilized.<sup>88</sup>

The Epicureans are apostates from this vision of social utility, and, in an increasingly globalized world, they represent eccentric voices worthy of toleration, if not support. They usefully remind utilitarians that utilitarians do not hold the whole truth, or at the least that there are deficits in how they hold the truth. As far as their own theory goes, some Epicurean commitments simply do not "scale up" to utilitarianism's theory of aggregative happiness, for better or for worse.

To think, then, that James Mill's austere and overly strict utilitarianism – "a life of labour and self-denial in preference to one of ease and pleasure"<sup>89</sup> – finds an alternative in J. S. Mill's revival of ancient Epicureanism is somewhat mistaken, even if there is real value in explaining the modern, materialist arc from Mandeville through Mill as distant but different forms of "Epicureanism." Mill rejects both mere utilitarianism and Epicureanism as theories in need of syntheses. The synthesis is different in important ways from the pure form of either theory. For Mill, human dignity requires humans to recognize and promote a more cooperative and connected society. Of course, Mill's synthesis is impressively complicated. He introduces a progressive moral conscience, and relies on theories of nationality, economics, gendered sympathy, ancient dialectical power, and religious humanism that may make his theory preferable to an

<sup>87</sup>Georgios Varouxakis, *Mill on Nationality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 113–16, 123–26.

<sup>88</sup>Mill, *Civilization*, XVIII, 120, 122; Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, p. 37.

<sup>89</sup>For the Choice of Heracles (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II.i.21–34), see Mill, *Autobiography*, I, 49; Mill, Grote's *History of Greece* [5], XXV (1986), 1157–64 (1162); and Grote's *Plato*, XI, 391–92.

Epicurean theory. But one cannot push past the challenge posed by Epicureans to utilitarianism; in theory, the question is the Sidgwickian one of interest versus duty, but even in practice, it is worth asking whether the tranquil quasi-citizen and their ideal sage might do less harm than progressive busybodies. Although it is too large a topic to consider here, it is also reasonable to recognize the limits of cooperation, civilization, and public-spirited reformism, and to consider alternative conceptions of philosophy as a practice of self-care and as sage-like withdrawal, among which we find Epicureanism as a prominent example.