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Desire as a Way of Knowing What Is Good in the Ethics of J. S. Mill (and Some Other Philosophers)

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John Stuart Mill asks in *Utilitarianism* how we know the first principles of morality. He answers that *desire*, which he compares to sensory faculties, is how we know that something is desirable. I suggest we take him at his word – desire is the faculty, or something very similar, of moral perception – and I give some provisional analysis of this idea. In assigning desire a role in moral knowledge, Mill connects to other philosophers who have done the same, including Aristotle and Boethius. Mill himself fails to give a thorough account of metaethics, but in considering desire as a faculty he adds an important epistemological component to the tradition of including desire in the account of moral knowledge. I suggest that Mill's ideas can inform the ideas of others in the tradition, and vice versa. Finally, I suggest that this whole conversation might be able to inform contemporary discussions of desire.

Keywords: Aristotle – Boethius – J. S. Mill – desire – moral psychology – moral epistemology

In defending his moral theory in chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill explains that desire is the only evidence that can be given that happiness is good. He says this in response to the question by what faculty or by what other means we can know the first principles of morality. I propose that we take Mill at his word: Desire is the human faculty, or something very similar, for knowing what is good. I will explain this notion in Mill and give some provisional analysis of its significance. It teaches that happiness is good, and in particular happiness consisting of higher-quality pleasures. In saying this, Mill fails to

give a thorough account of metaethics (understandably, since he was writing articles in *Fraser's Magazine* for a popular audience). However, he succeeds in articulating, and to some extent developing, an important idea about desire that may be found in other philosophers such as Aristotle and Boethius. That idea is that desire has a role in our knowledge of morality. By attending to, and perhaps integrating, related insights from Mill and others, particularly from the premodern emphasis on metaphysics and the modern emphasis on epistemology, we may be able to give a fuller account of this idea as well as a better understanding of desire in general.

I will first give my understanding of Mill's remarks on desire and then consider his idea in context of the larger conversation in western philosophy on the role of desire in the human process of knowing what is good.

I. Mill on Desire

Let's take a look at the text, compare my reading of Mill's chapter 4 to some other Mill scholars, and consider chapter 4 in the context of other chapters of *Utilitarianism* as well as Mill's *System of Logic*.

Mill treats desire as that function of a human being by which we recognize what is good. The good is happiness, especially that happiness which consists of higher-quality pleasures, and the difference between a right and a wrong action is determined by how it affects happiness. On these points Mill's account is thoroughly empirical. Mill, of course, is committed to developing a consistent empiricism, in both ethics and science (Crisp 1997, 11).

How do we know the likely results of some possible future action, except from experience of the results of similar past actions? In *Utilitarianism*'s chapter 2, Mill explains the utilitarian theory about the morality of actions – what is right is what brings about the greatest happiness (Mill 1957, 10). It rests on a theory about the meaning of life – that happiness is its only purpose. Chapter 4 defends the underlying theory of life, while chapter 2 explains the utilitarian view of the morality of actions, correcting several misunderstandings and developing his theory in light of some common objections.

Most important in chapter 2 is Mill's account of qualitative differences among pleasures. Pleasures exercising the higher human faculties, or intellectual pleasures, are more important to happiness than physical pleasures – the lower, merely animal pleasures. *Quality* of pleasure matters more than *quantity* (Mill 1957, 11 – 15). No amount of a lower-quality pleasure is worth the sacrifice of any amount of a higher-quality one. Mill explains that experience shows which pleasures are higher-quality: Only someone who has experienced

both of two pleasures is qualified to say which is better. I can testify that I have much enjoyed both philosophy and ice cream, and would not sacrifice the pleasures of the former for any amount of the latter. There can, says Mill, be no proof of the higher quality of a pleasure than the testimony of those who are so experienced – "or, if they differ, that of the majority among them…" (Mill 1957, 15). Mill elaborates little on critical and skeptical worries, but his brief book has resources for responding to various challenges. For example, what about the person who claims that he enjoys physical pleasures more? The fact that I do not enjoy opera at all, and much prefer ice cream, only shows that I am not a competent judge between these two pleasures: I have not experienced the pleasure of opera. "Capacity for the nobler feelings," he says, needs some cultivation – which presumably my own capacity for enjoyment of opera never received. Or what if a majority enjoy oppressing a minority? Other teachings which can help to answer concern the importance of the Golden Rule, since the happiness of *everyone*, not only of *me*, matters (Mill 1957, 22 – 23); of the general (but not universal) benefits of liberty and of leaving people alone to take care of themselves (Mill 1957, 19, 25); and of inherited moral rules, such as rules against oppression, as the ones which experience has taught us contribute to happiness (Mill 1957, 30 – 32).

Another idea in chapter 2 involves human nature: We humans have particular rational faculties, the exercise of which creates the higher pleasures. Mill leaves this idea largely undeveloped; we will return to it in due time.

But how do we know that pleasure is good at all, and that happiness really is the purpose of human life? Mill touts his theory of life in answer to the question, also the title of chapter 4, "Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible." Mill is interested in first principles. The utilitarian theory of morality is such a principle or, rather, the *theory of life* is a first principle, and the utilitarian theory of morality a *second* principle. First principles "do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptation of the term" (Mill 1957, 44). They serve as evidence for other principles, and are the *source* of evidence; as such, they cannot be *given* evidence from other principles. (For elaboration, see Raphael 1955, 346.) We must quote Mill at length:

> To be incapable of proof by reasoning is common to all first principles; to the first premises of our knowledge, as well as to those of our conduct. But the former, being matters of fact, may be the subject of a direct appeal to the faculties which judge of fact – namely, our senses, and our internal consciousness. Can an appeal be made to the same faculties on questions of practical ends? Or by what other faculty is cognisance taken of them?

> Questions about ends are, in other words, questions what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end….
>
> The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so (Mill 1957, 44).

Desire is the faculty of moral perception, or something very similar: Desire is to the first principles of morality what the five senses are to knowledge of the physical world. The many facts learned through sensory experience are the first principles of our knowledge of the physical world, but there is only one first principle of morality learned through desire: Happiness is good. Here, of course, that is what something "desirable" is – not merely something which *can* be desired, but something that *should* be, something which is worthy of desiring.

Mill has only shown so far that happiness is *a* good thing. He spends the bulk of chapter 4, an interesting piece of moral psychology, showing that it is the *only* good thing, explaining how other supposed purposes of life – including money, power, fame, and especially virtue – are either means to the end of happiness or else have become components *of* happiness. Virtue itself turns out to be not only useful as a means to the end of greater happiness, but also a form of intellectual pleasure of the highest quality.

Now Mill is a moral realist, holding that there is an objectively correct understanding of right vs. wrong, beginning with recognizing the value of happiness. And he thinks desire is a way of learning this – a faculty, or something near enough, of moral perception. We know through desire that happiness is good; this is not knowledge arising *a priori*.

And, of course, a faculty can err; Mill understands that we can want the wrong thing; see his remarks on "infirmity of character" in chapter 2 (Mill 1957, 14). The point is not that everything anyone desires is good; the point is that desire is all we have to work with in knowing what is good, and that (as chapter 4 argues at length) all we ever really desire is happiness. Learning that my own selfish desires are wrong because they are against the greater increase of happiness, which I know to be good through desire, is akin to

using my eyes to take a closer look at something of which a first, brief glance had misinformed me.

Mill's idea of desire as a faculty for recognizing good has rarely been recognized. Let us compare my interpretation of these few paragraphs of Mill to a few others.

Raphael, if I understand rightly, thinks Mill is not even arguing that happiness *is* desirable, for he denies moral facts; there is no true moral statement of what *is* – only of what *should be* (Raphael 1955, 346 – 349). The appeal to sensory experience for knowledge of fact is unlike the appeal to desire in ethics. Sensory experience gives evidence for a fact, but desire is not evidence for a moral fact – it is merely an experience of having a preference. That happiness is the ultimate end "cannot be proved, but it can be explained," which is all Mill is aiming for.

Now I agree that Mill relies entirely on experience, and I grant he is not clear enough on moral realism to profess clearly and directly that there are moral facts – that statements having the form "X is good" are factual. (We will return to this in due time.) However, I think Raphael is missing the significance of Mill's use of desire to answer the question by what faculty we take cognizance of ultimate ends. There is more here than just an argument that we find in experience that we want happiness. Mill's question is: "Or by what other faculty is cognisance taken of" (Mill 1957, 44) the first principles of conduct? He does not respond by explaining that actually there is no such faculty after all, and there is no way of knowing these first principles because moral realism is a myth. Rather, he draws out the analogy of desire to sensory experience, showing that these forms of experience are foundational to our beliefs – one to our beliefs about the physical world, the other to our moral beliefs – and that they are equally rational.

Marshall's Mill is more solidly in the moral realist camp: Mill argues that happiness is desirable, which means that it is good and should be sought or promoted (Marshall 1973, 13 – 26). Mill argues from an *is* to an *ought* – from observations on what we desire to conclusions about what we should do; this is evidence of a sort, but not logical entailment. Marshall points out that Mill's logic textbook recognizes that statements of what *should be* are statements of fact in a sense – statements that we approve of certain things and that reasons can be given that we do so properly. Mill's argument can be developed along empirical lines as giving reasons thus: The only possible candidate for desirability is happiness, since this and nothing else is in fact desired (Marshall 1973, 17 – 19). Similarly, Seth's classic article on *Utilitarianism* explains that

"what we ought to desire is what we are able to desire," leaving pleasure as the only possible candidate for what we ought to desire (Seth 1908, 476).

West reads Mill straightforwardly, although I think there is more to say than he says: "For questions of practical ends, appeal must be made to the faculty of desire" (West 2006, 175). "Desire is evidence of desirability, but does not confer desirability" (West 2006, 178). Its evidence calls for critical reflection. The appeal to desire "is not a logical proof in the sense that its negation involves a contradiction. But it is an argument from experience…" (West 2006, 182).

Similarly, there is more to be said than Sayre-McCord says in a brilliant article. McCord correctly observes that "desires play the same epistemic role that the senses play when it comes to the first principles of knowledge" (Sayre-McCord 2001, 338). He further explains that "desiring something is a matter of seeing it as good" in Mill (340). Just so. McCord goes on to elaborate on the structure of Mill's argument, connecting it to an argument in Kant.

"'Desirable' means something like 'worth desiring,'" Crisp explains (Crisp 1997, 75 – 77). Ethics is concerned not with the facts of how things are, but with what we should bring about – the "ultimate ends of conduct" (Crisp 1997, 75). "Just as I can appeal to your visual sense in the case of matters of fact, Mill is suggesting, I can appeal to your desiring faculty in the case of ultimate ends." Desire is a faculty recognizing what sort of end we should pursue. It is fallible, as Mill would probably agree (Crisp 1997, 76). Nevertheless, it is a clue or a reminder that we recognize the desirability of some things. Desire conveys information about what is good. Still, if I understand Crisp rightly, desire is not itself the *source* of information on goodness. The recognition of goodness "is not itself a desire so much as a sensitivity to the evaluative properties that make certain things good or desirable."

Skorupski, in his book for Routledge's Arguments of the Philosophers series, explains that the point of Mill's remarks on desire is that we *already* take happiness to be an end. That happiness is desirable is "established by an appeal to reflective practice . . ." (Skorupski 1989, 286). "The objectivity of happiness as an end is, and can only be, grounded in reflective agreement; not in this case of spontaneous reasoning propensities, but of spontaneous *desires*." Skorupski further explains that Mill is not a moral skeptic in the model of David Hume (Skorupski 1989, 288 – 295). Mill is appealing to foundational principles we already accept and do not need to prove – the sources of knowledge, themselves minimally capable of proof. However, the appeal of "reflectively analyzed desires" (Skorupski 1989, 285) is good enough, and that happiness is good is as well justified as other foundational principles for knowledge, like

the Principle of Induction (Skorupski 1989, 8 – 9; also recommended reading, and drawing from Skorupski, is Miller 2010, 43 – 45; Miller's connection is to the reliability of memory in Mill, not the principle of induction.)

It is just here that I think we have not yet fully appreciated Mill's idea of desire as a faculty. It is true that, as Skorupski says, Mill is not giving any proof that happiness is good; he is pointing to first principles we already accept. Skorupski rightly emphasizes Mill's observation that "If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so" (Skorupski 1989, 286). Skorupski is right that Mill is talking about a foundational principle that we already accept and do not need to prove. In foundationalist epistemology, one need not give a deductive proof for a first principle, and Skorupski rightly reminds us that Mill points out that we all already accept the same principle. But in foundationalist epistemology, we can at least give some *account* of how we know a first principle, or by what faculty cognizance is taken of it. Mill is saying, albeit rather briefly, that desire is itself that faculty, the source of knowledge of the value of happiness.

To confirm our reading of Mill, we must consider some other passages. His *System of Logic* – in Book 6, chapter 12 – also considers the nature of moral reasoning, reaffirming Mill's distinction – which he views as an absolute disjunction – between statements of what is and of what should be (Mill 1882, Book 6, chapter 12, section 6). Science pertains only to what is, and what pertains to what *should* be is properly called *art* (Mill 1882, section 1). Morality is a branch of art (Mill 1882, section 6). Art requires that we can support our views through "general premises, determining what are the proper objects of approbation, and what the proper order of precedence among those objects." This leads to the idea of the "first principles of Conduct" (Mill 1882, section 7). Ultimately, there can only be one first principle. Otherwise, first principles might disagree, calling for some mediating principle, which would then be the *real* first principle. The only real first principle is the promotion of happiness, which Mill does not attempt to justify in this book, pointing us instead back to *Utilitarianism*! So the *System of Logic* does not shed much light on this passage beyond clarifying that *is* statements and statements of what *should be* or *ought to be* are never the same and that there must be one first principle of ethics – that we should seek happiness.

In chapter 1 of *Utilitarianism*, Mill explains that "Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof," being by definition concerned with the first principles by means of which we prove everything else in morality (Mill

1957, 7). However, they are "within the cognizance of the rational faculty," by means not of intuition but of considerations supporting an agreement with them. These considerations may be called, loosely speaking, proof. Mill nods towards his own chapter 4.

Chapter 3 begins thus:

> The question is often asked, and properly so, in regard to any supposed moral standard – What is its sanction? what are the motives to obey it? or more specifically, what is the source of its obligation? whence does it derive its binding force? (Mill 1957, 34).

The ultimate sanction of utility is a subjective feeling – the feeling of wanting the good of others, or "the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures" (Mill 1957, 41). He considers the idea – which we are meant to associate with Kant – that moral obligation is "a transcendental fact, an objective reality belonging to the province of 'things in themselves.'" This would not change the fact that we still obey our obligations out of a subjective feeling of conscience. While technically Mill does not here dispute this idea of transcendental obligation, he plainly rejects it. Is he perhaps *not*, after all, a moral realist – is he denying that there are any objective moral facts? And what is the point of chapter 3 anyway – is he even *talking* about obligations, or only about our motive for recognizing them?

I answer: When we encounter some interpretive difficulty in Mill's book, we should not tie ourselves in knots looking for the right interpretation. We should, whenever possible, select the simplest reading available to a reasonably well-educated reader of English in the 1800s. Occasionally, we may for the sake of clarity need to make subtler distinctions than Mill did. So, in chapter 3, is he talking about that which makes us obey moral obligation, or about the origin of the very existence of obligations? Plainly the former. But if he has any view on the latter, I think it is also to be found here. Mill does not deny that moral obligations factually exist. He only explains that they do not exist *in themselves*, but are rooted in happiness, which of course points us, once again, to chapter 4. The point of chapter 3 is to explain that there is no "other ground of moral obligation than the general happiness" (Mill 1957, 35) and also, along the way, to comment on the importance of cultivating the disposition to care about the happiness of others.

In short, from what I can tell, chapters 1 and 3 also guide us towards chapter 4, whose brief remarks on desire are left to be interpreted more or less on their own, as I have done here, taking Mill at his word in classifying desire

as the moral analogue to sensory faculties and the answer to the question how we know the first principles of morality.

Let us briefly summarize Mill's major points on desire.

First, there is a distinction between "matters of fact" and moral principles – between statements of what *is* and statements of what *should be* (Raphael 1955, 345). (Here, Mill resembles the likes of Hume and G. E. Moore on the so-called naturalistic fallacy.)

Second, first principles are those which justify other principles and themselves are not justified by other principles – things, strictly speaking, "incapable of proof." In terms of contemporary analytic epistemology, these are the first principles of epistemological foundationalism.

Third, and again as in contemporary analytic epistemology, these first principles are not unwarranted or irrational just because they are not justified by other principles. They are warranted some other way.

Fourth, they are learned *empirically*.

Fifth, the first principles of physical facts are the products of sensory perception, and they are warranted by the faculties of sensory perception.

Whence, then, our understanding of what is good? What are the first principles of ethics, and how do we know them?

It turns out, sixth, that there is only one first principle of ethics – happiness is good. (Of course, we have to build on this principle to know just which pleasures and what sort of happiness are morally preferable.)

And seventh, we know this principle by desire, the moral analogue to sensory perception. Desirability is (or is entailed by) goodness, and desire is how we perceive desirability.

II. Mill and the Other Philosophers

Mill uses desire to answer the question by what faculty we know what is good. This interesting move links him to a larger tradition in philosophy which includes desire in its account of how we know about morality. Here I shall first give a brief introduction to Aristotle and Boethius as representatives of that tradition. Then I shall suggest that Mill's own unique contribution to this tradition may be his description of desire as a faculty, although the tradition may have something to offer him in its more thorough account of metaethics.

This will not be a thorough study of Aristotle or Boethius so much as a rough-and-ready introduction to the tradition they represent and some ways it connects to Mill.

We desire happiness. Since happiness is a human activity, we can understand the good in terms of the proper human function, says Aristotle. The good of a thing is its proper function, so, if happiness is the good of human beings, it must be the proper human function. This sets the stage for the account in *Nicomachean Ethics*, and indeed the entire virtue ethics tradition of western philosophy, in which the concept of proper human function is central. In order to understand human happiness, we must understand our proper function, which must involve some attention to metaphysics. We must recognize proper functions as real things, and we must give some account of what a human being *is*. Aristotle gets to the outlines of this account before completing Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics*. He briefly describes the functions of the human soul – nutrition, growth, perception, and rationality. He also takes up the idea of Plato in the *Republic* that the non-rational aspects of the human being must be governed by reason in order to achieve proper human function and happiness. Aristotle's swift move from happiness as the ultimate end to a metaphysical account of the human being is a lesson for doing ethics: If we are going to seek happiness as the ultimate end and if happiness is something *human beings* experience, then we are probably going to have to do at least enough metaphysics to know what humans *are* and how we function best.

The Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius is a meditation on philosophy, religion, and happiness. A relevant passage occurs at the beginning of Book III. Lady Philosophy is speaking to Boethius:

> "But you say you are eager to hear more. You would be more than eager if you knew the destination I am trying to bring you to."
> I asked what it was and she told me that it was true happiness.
> "Your mind dreams of it," she said, "but your sight is clouded by shadows of happiness and cannot see the reality" (Boethius 1969; new ed. 1999, 47).

Earthly distractions have clouded his mind, but the desire for happiness stands like a signpost pointing to a land of half-forgotten memory. As Book III continues, Lady Philosophy explains that his idea of the happiness he desires correctly recognizes several real aspects of happiness – self-sufficiency, respect, power, and fame. In our confusion, we look for these in wealth, high office, political power, glory, and physical pleasures – mere shadows of happiness. But we can find self-sufficiency, respect, power, and fame – together. This involves an immortal perfection, namely God. We must turn within, seeking virtue, and also upward to the immortal perfection of God, on which human virtue depends.

This knowledge of happiness appears to be built into the human mind, and while there are likely some influences from Platonic, Aristotelian, or Stoic sources, Boethius' view is probably best explained in terms of Augustinian illumination theory. The knowledge may involve a response to experience, but does not derive from experience. Desire responds to this knowledge. We know something about happiness, and so want it. Still, desire appears also to play, in and of itself, a role analogous to knowing: In our current, confused state, we do not know anymore exactly what happiness is or where exactly to look for it, but our desire for happiness is our best clue to what sort of happiness we should seek. Like an eye in a dark room searching for a light switch, desire does not give us the light of wisdom, but it tells us something about what to look for.

There is a great deal more in this tradition, including, for example, some ideas in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. In the beginning of *Confessions*, for example, Augustine explains that God made us for himself, and our restless, desiring hearts are meant to find satisfaction in Him. Desire points to goodness, ideally to the goodness of God, although it tends to sin by going astray towards lesser goods. The main point is only that other great philosophers have discussed desire as a part of how we know morality. Mill may have something useful to offer to this tradition. Aristotle and Boethius tend to focus more on ethics and on the nature of reality, lacking the direct focus on knowledge that characterizes modern philosophy. Mill, a thoroughly modern philosopher, focuses directly on knowledge in his remarks on desire in chapter 4. Mill says that desire is how we know the first principle of morality, that happiness is good. This is a first principle we rationally accept, needing no further evidence. This is a good start on foundationalism in epistemology. Mill demonstrates the epistemic parity obtaining between the first principle of morality and sensory beliefs, explaining that they all depend on faculties; the first principle of morality is known through desire, and the first principles of the physical world through sight, taste, smell, hearing, and touch. And we all agree anyway. Mill's comparison of desire as a way of apprehending the first principle of morality to sensory faculties as a way of apprehending first principles about the physical world is a rich idea, one he leaves undeveloped. To bring this idea into its fullness, we would need to give an account of what sort of faculties are a source of knowledge and of how they work, perhaps borrowing from the development of such an epistemology in the common-sense tradition in modern and contemporary epistemology. (See, for the classic source of this account, Reid 2017 and, for a more detailed account of epistemic faculties, Plantinga 1993, especially 46 – 47.) Nevertheless, if Aristotle and Boethius are correct, lovers of

their philosophy have reason to appreciate Mill's epistemological contribution by describing desire as the moral analogue to sensory perception and arguing for the epistemic parity of desire with sensory faculties as sources of our foundational beliefs.

Finally, this tradition has something to offer to Mill's moral philosophy in return – more metaphysics. Recall that Mill's *System of Logic* states that *is* statements and statements of *what should be* are never the same thing, classifying moral statements exclusively among the latter. So, no statement of what *is* good, strictly speaking, would be possible in Mill's philosophy.

But does this really make sense? Mill will grant that statements like "I should eat more vegetables" can be correct. But a statement like this can only be meaningful if it is *also* true that "It would be good if I were to eat more vegetables." In other words, every *ought* or *should* statement corresponds to a *would be good if* statement. And every *would be good if* statement corresponds to an *is good that* statement: It cannot be true that "It would be good if I were to eat more vegetables" unless there is another meaningful statement along the lines of "It is good that I am now eating more vegetables."

Of course, this last statement is *not* true – not *yet*, not until I start eating more vegetables. But the point is that the statement is *meaningful*, and that statements of this nature sometimes *are* true. In fact, the whole point of ethics, in the broadest possible terms, is to identify the correct *would be good if* statements and so act as to bring it about that their corresponding *is good that* statements *become* true.

Accordingly, I doubt that any absolute division of *ought* or *should be* statements from *is* statements can be maintained. We need to recognize that some things actually *are* good if we are to make any sense of ethics. It is just here that Mill's own idea can benefit from the ideas of philosophers like Aristotle or Boethius, for such philosophers fill in the metaphysical gap left by Mill's ethics – meaning that they include some account of the nature of reality as part of their explanation of ethics. They explain that happiness *is* good, and they also give an account of the nature of that reality which makes happiness, and other things, good.

An account of what *is* good would also allow us to develop and defend an important idea Mill leaves largely implicit in his book, the aforementioned idea of human nature as having the built-in capacity for rational activity. Aristotle appeals to this idea as a metaphysics of the human person, justifying his moral teachings. Medieval philosophers, of course, agree with this much, adding their own theology – a soul capable of existing after death, a soul designed for

loving God and neighbor, and so on. Mill says in chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism* that "A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy" than mere physical pleasures (Mill 1957, 13). But all he is interested in is the superiority of intellectual pleasure, rooted in the exercise of universal human rational capacities, as known in experience. I do not object to this – as far as it goes. But we can go farther. If we join the premodern philosophers in giving a metaphysics of the human person, then we can add to Mill's claims about empirical support for intellectual pleasure, virtue, the Golden Rule, and so on the further claim that we are *meant* for such things. There is a proper human function, which teaches these (and more) moral lessons.

We have, perhaps, only scratched the surface of the rich interplay of ideas from Mill and other philosophers who assign desire a role in the understanding of morality. I have argued that we may read Mill straightforwardly as presenting desire as the answer to the question by what faculty we know the first principle of morality – that happiness is good. Happiness is to knowledge of morality what the five senses are to knowledge of the physical world. This intriguing idea is not without precedent, for Aristotle and other philosophers include desire in their account of moral knowledge. I have suggested that Mill's epistemological focus is an important contribution to this tradition, even as the metaphysical focus of others in the tradition might be useful in clarifying Mill's own moral theory. "Of the making of many books there is no end," but perhaps the role of desire in human moral knowledge could be clarified by piecing together these different insights.

In closing, I suggest that this discussion may also help us understand desire in general. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on "Desire" barely mentions Aristotle, and makes no mention of Mill or Boethius. However, it does point to some controversies where the ideas of Mill, particularly if they are brought into dialogue with the likes of Aristotle and Boethius, might help to clarify things. I will mention two. Is desire in itself a reason to act (Schroeder 2015, section 3.4)? If it is, then is Christine Korsgaard right that this very fact is an evaluative fact independent of desire? If so, then perhaps this is just what Mill left out, and just what Aristotle et al could help to clarify by giving an account of what *is*, including what *is good*. And what is the relation of desire to well-being (Schroeder 2015, section 3.5)? Here, Mill's account of desire – particularly in conjunction with his observations, later in chapter 4, about the importance of virtue and, in chapter 2, about the superiority of intellectual pleasures to physical pleasures – lends some modern support to the ancient eudaimonistic project. The lesson of Mill is one which

Aristotle and Boethius were also talking about: Learn what is the greatest good, and reorient your life around the pursuit of it.

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