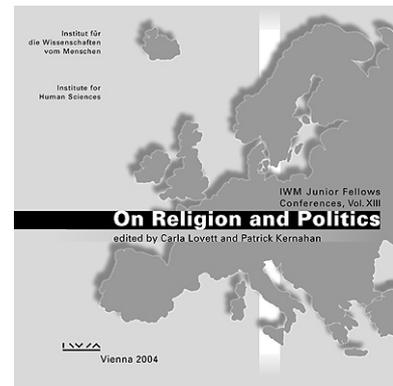


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Perfection and Immortality: The Aesthetic Turn in Mill's Ethics

Colin Heydt

Why should we be interested in Mill's aesthetic theory? Though a moderately important representative of one school of criticism, he did not write extensively on the subject, nor with any great originality. Moreover, his views on aesthetics, unlike his views in logic, ethics, politics, etc., were not, as far as I know, terribly influential. Rather than the foundation of thinking in this subject, his writings are more like the roofing or interior design in a house designed and built by someone else.

Nevertheless, Mill considers aesthetics with his characteristic seriousness and thoughtfulness, and this gives his positions an intrinsic interest. More important perhaps are the insights that his views on aesthetics can offer for understanding his ethical theory, which frequently differentiates itself from Bentham's and from others through the striking use of aesthetic conceptualizations of human life – a call to attend to our lives as works of art and to character and action in terms of their beauty and ugliness. We cannot properly engage Mill's ethical views without seeing how his aesthetics contextualize them. My hope is that such an investigation will also facilitate an appreciation of the philosophical content and import of an incorporation of the aesthetic into the ethical.

What it means to shape ethical attention by appeal to beauty can be notoriously slippery.¹ Moreover, there are numerous possible implications associated with establishing a connection between the beautiful and the good. I therefore want to organize this paper around answering two questions. 1) In Mill's view, what would it mean to aestheticize something? When he invokes aesthetic concepts, what should that signal to a reader? I address this by giving an account of Mill's earlier and later aesthetic theories, which have been understudied, and by trying to reconstruct what these theories have to say about the character of the artist, of the aesthetic object and of the person of taste. 2) What particular shape does Mill's aestheticizing take in relation to self-evaluation and self-development?² I will show how there are two levels at which the self ought to be treated aesthetically, i.e. seen as a potential object of aesthetic concern: in terms of its perfectibility, and in terms of its immortality and relation to a providential universe.

I. Mill's Aesthetic Theory

Early Aesthetic Theory

If the frequently cited influence of Romanticism on Mill is to have any purchase, it must surely find it in his aesthetics.³ As Abrams demonstrates, it would be impossible not to see the connections between Mill's early theory of poetry and the writings of the Romantics, particularly Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Even if he lacks ground-breaking insights in aesthetics, Mill is nevertheless an important representative of the move away from neo-classical aesthetic standards to Romantic ones.

Mill's earliest work on poetry, the aptly titled "What is Poetry?" argues for, following Wordsworth, an expressivist theory of poetry and other arts. In such a theory, the aesthetic value of art is constituted by the emotional self-expression of the artist, the overflow of which leads to the creation of the work.

Mill begins to develop this theory by trying to characterize poetry through showing what it is not. First of all, he accepts Wordsworth's opposition of poetry with

¹ See Robert E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1995). A central theme in Norton's treatment is that the malleability (or emptiness) of the idea of the beautiful soul fed its great popularity in the 18th century. In fact, "the conceptual boundaries of the beautiful soul were so generously drawn, or so poorly defined, that evil itself could find room within its domain" (p.289).

² The next chapter will deal with the broader issue of the impact of this aesthetic turn on Mill's understanding of ethical evaluation in general.

³ Another likely locus is in Mill's views on history and historiography.

the sciences. The latter addresses itself to belief and operates through reason and rational persuasion. The former focuses on the emotions and operates through imagination and affective response. The sciences speak a language attuned to the understanding, while poetry's language is attuned to the feelings. As Abrams notes in relation to Wordsworth, the traditional opposition of poetry to history, grounded on their differing objects of representation (poetry: universal and ideal, history: particular, actual event), is dropped in favor of the opposition of poetry to science, which grows out of the increased emphasis placed on the distinction of emotive/expressive vs. cognitive/descriptive language (p.101).

Interestingly, this parallels a change in poetry's closest artistic relations. Through much of antiquity and beyond, poetry was frequently compared to painting. Both were, on the authority of Aristotle, paradigmatic of the primary function of art – the imitation of nature. What aspect of nature was to be imitated, and in what way, depended on the perspective (e.g. Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, etc.) of the critic, painter, or poet.

Towards the end of the 18th century, however, in both England and Germany, a shifting conception of poetry moved it away from painting and the ideal of imitation, towards the expressive, and towards a perception of a closer relationship with that more abstract art, music (Abrams, p.84). Great poetry is feeling reflecting upon itself, not upon external events. In this respect, great poetry and great music share a close bond.⁴

The second opposition of poetry, and thus art more generally, is made with the novel. Whereas poetry excites interest on the basis of its exploration of feeling, the novel depends upon interest aroused through incident or “mere outward circumstances” (Aesthetics,161). Mill claims that the strength of the dissimilarity between the poetic and novelistic nature can be seen in the fact that “a really strong passion for either of the two, seems to presuppose or to superinduce a comparative indifference to the other,” (ibid.).

⁴ These shifts were mirrored in the changing fortunes of the various poetic forms. Under the regime of the imitative critical tradition, the epic was a favored son. It seemed to offer the appropriate space and structure for truthful imitation. The lyric, on the other hand, remained the poor cousin of poetic forms. It was considered superficial and trite, even if it was often pleasing. Within the expressivist critical tradition, however, the lyric ruled. Its relative brevity was considered perfectly suited for the main task of poetry: the expression of feeling. The epic drags on, providing us with too much information; and in so doing, it interferes with the successful picturing of single emotions by, like an overzealous kindergartener, mixing in too many ‘paints,’ until all we have is an ugly brown or purple. See M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1953).

The novelistic person⁵, it must be said, does not show well in this account, as we can see in the following important passage:

The sort of persons whom not merely in books but in their lives, we find perpetually engaged in hunting for excitement from without, are invariably those who do not possess, either in the vigor of their intellectual powers or in the depth of their sensibilities, that which would enable them to find ample excitement nearer at home. The same persons whose time is divided between sight-seeing, gossip, and fashionable dissipation, take a natural delight in fictitious narrative; the excitement it affords is of the kind which comes from without. Such persons are rarely lovers of poetry, though they may fancy themselves so, because they relish novels in verse. But poetry, which is the delineation of the deeper and more secret workings of the human heart, is interesting only to those to whom it recalls what they have felt, or whose imagination it stirs up to conceive what they could feel, or what they might have been able to feel, had their outward circumstances been different. (ibid.)

A few things need to be noted here. First of all, this text exemplifies a continuing emphasis throughout Mill's aesthetic writings on valorizing interiority over and against the external, superficial, and public. Though I cannot make a decisive argument for this at the moment, I think this is at least very suggestive of two possible divergences with Benthamite utilitarianism: 1) in moral judgment, Bentham prioritizes the externality of action over internal character (the latter being evaluated only through its tendency to produce action), and 2) Bentham's emphasis on legislation and jurisprudence places a great deal of weight on publicity against subjectivity and privacy.

Secondly, interiority is tied together with self-containment, separation from the social, and independence. All of that is reflected in not looking outward for diversion or excitement. Thirdly, A capacity for turning within also entails the possibility of access to hidden features of human experience. Mill often utilizes 'depth' imagery in discussing human psychology to distance his position from what he considered to be the over-simplified Benthamite accounts. Moreover, by implying complexity and importance, it supported his demand for the cultivation of our inner life, including emotions and imagination – i.e. one should not ignore the "deeper and more secret workings of the human heart" even in thought concerned only with action or legislation (as an example, see X.56, and "Bentham" p.155-6).

⁵ 'Novel-reader' tended to be a very gendered category in Mill's Britain. Laments about the effects of novels on young women were common, and became particularly pressing with the rise of the 'Gothic' novel of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Lastly, the imagination is featured prominently and in a way which presages the attractiveness of Ruskin's aesthetics for Mill. As we will see shortly, the peculiarly aesthetic activity of the imagination will receive greater articulation through Mill's engagement with Ruskin.

A final contrast for poetry is found in eloquence. Both are alike in being "the expression or uttering forth of feeling" (162), but rhetoric remains concentrated on an audience. The rhetorical tradition in aesthetics, in which the function of art lay in evoking some kind of reaction from audiences, has a long history. Generally, the reaction desired was emotive and/or educational, i.e. pleasure and/or instruction. The good artist, on this view, attends carefully to the relationship of the artwork and its observer, trying to shape the work in accordance with the psychological propensities of the spectator.

Poetry for Mill, alternatively, is "feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols, which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind," (CW, I.348-9). The symbol may be difficult and inaccessible, and thus not a favored rhetorical device, but it is necessary for the poet. Those features of great works of art under this view, are brooding, symbolic qualities which are only contingently related to a spectator.⁶ These symbols serve to refer beyond themselves, in a way that other kinds of language cannot, to the state-of-mind of the artist. To call a poem great, is to mean that the poem expresses feeling well, not necessarily that it evokes it in the reader, though naturally this occurs in the sensitive lover of poetry.

Mill's heightens the contrast by suggesting that whereas rhetoric or eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard* (Aesthetics, p.162). He means that the poet, unlike the rhetorician or novelist, is ideally unconcerned with audience. To encounter a good poem is to witness un-self-consciousness. It is human feeling at its most natural, namely, at its most private and earnest. Poetry is emotive expression for its own sake, rather than as an instrument employed to convince or move another. Whereas

⁶ The only possible exception to this in Mill's writing comes in his discussion of the value of works which promote moral education. Now most moral and aesthetic education which comes through art is, in a certain sense, accidental. That is, artwork has educational value, but it is not made with that value in mind, for that would demand an attention to audience. Some works, however, most prominently Plato's dialogues, are considered 'poetic' by Mill, and their poetry lies in their making the moral life so beautiful that the reader is brought to love virtue. Though Mill never says this, I would guess that he might have considered these to be explicitly didactic works of art, directed to education, and therefore standing squarely within the rhetorical aesthetic tradition. The way to reject this latter view would be to suggest that those elements of the dialogues which are beautiful are precisely those which are most un-self-conscious.

eloquence grows out of “intercourse with the world” (p.163), poetry is the “natural fruit of solitude and meditation”. When the character of a nation encourages turning outward and attention to others, as Mill claims happens in France, eloquence and the celebration of the rhetorician is more often the result than poetry and the celebration of the great poet.

But if poetry is “of the nature of soliloquy” (p.163), how can one explain the rather obvious relation of art to the marketplace and to consumers? Mill suggests that poetry “which is printed on hot-pressed paper, and sold at a bookseller’s shop, is a soliloquy in full dress, and upon the stage”. “But” he goes on “there is nothing absurd in the idea of such a mode of soliloquizing. What we have said to ourselves, we may tell to others afterwards; what we have said or done in solitude, we may voluntarily reproduce when we know that other eyes are upon us. But no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself,” (ibid.). This holds even for that art, drama, which seems most dependent upon audience. The actor knows that people are watching, but if his performance reflects it, he has failed as an artist. This anti-rhetoric/anti-audience strand in Mill will have heightened implications when our discussion turns to the level of self-aestheticization where one is called upon to see one’s life as a work of art and to stand in relation to it as an artist.

Mill’s writing also suggests that it is not only the poet who must understand introspection and separation from the bustle of everyday existence; the appreciator of poetry must as well. It is the turn inward leading to a more varied and authentically human emotional life, which poetry depends upon and celebrates. Without having had this sort of self-reflexivity, the reader of poetry will not be able to engage the poem. She will simply not understand the emotions that the poet ponders, because she will not have had them. The depth of the poet’s emotions can only be plumbed by someone who has an adequate rope.

This implies a broad change in the proper evaluator of the poem. The poetry addressed to an audience will vary in complexity, of course, depending upon the audience. It attempts, in principle, to make itself accessible. Under the Millian aesthetic, however, the poem, and the poet, should be looking inward. The criterion of aesthetic success is feeling’s expression of itself to itself. The poet strives to make this expression clear using the symbols and language appropriate to the task, i.e. those which provoke the imagination, but it is a standard of clarity informed not by an audience per se, but by the intrinsic demands of the activity itself.⁷ The good audi-

⁷ Taken too far, this can lead to highly subjective productions – an almost solipsistic art full of private symbolism. Abrams notes that Wordsworth was aware of this possible inference from

tor of poetry, therefore, will be he or she who has enough familiarity with, and attunement to, the practice of feeling's self-exploration.

Mill goes on to attempt to broaden this view of poetry into a general aesthetic theory. Of the other fine arts, Mill places music, "so peculiarly the expression of passion" (Aesthetics, p.163), closest to poetry. The best works of Mozart, the great poet of music, are versions of musical soliloquies. They too represent passion in conversation with itself, a conversation overheard by the audience. The passions expressed are those, generally speaking, which are most characteristic of the artist. Art and its evaluation turn more than ever to the creator of the artwork.

Mill seems less sure of himself when he moves, after brief discussions of sculpture and the painting of human figures, into landscape painting and architecture, suggesting that there "are some productions of art which it seems at first difficult to arrange in any of the classes above illustrated," (p.165). The direct aim of art, the production of the beautiful, does not seem restricted to the representation of beautiful states of mind alone, that characterize the poetic. And yet, argues Mill, the great landscape, for example, still possesses a character of poetry without which it could not be so beautiful:

"The unity, and wholeness, and aesthetic congruity of the picture still lies in singleness of expression; but it is expression in a different sense from that in which we have hitherto employed the term. The objects in an imaginary landscape cannot be said, like the words of a poem or the notes of a melody, to be the actual utterance of a feeling; but there must be some feeling with which they harmonize, and which they have a tendency to raise up in the spectator's mind. They must inspire a feeling of grandeur, a loveliness, a cheerfulness, a wildness, a melancholy, a terror. The painter must surround his principal objects with such imagery as would spontaneously arise in a highly imaginative mind, when contemplating those objects under the impression of the feelings which they are intended to inspire. This, if it be not poetry, is so nearly allied to it, as scarcely to require being distinguished" (p.165).

Mill is striving for uniformity within his aesthetics, but he is clearly straining. Nevertheless his general intent is relatively clear. Aesthetic value rests in the manner in which an artist is able to capture, in whatever medium he uses, the expression of an emotion. As we see here, the landscape acts indirectly: the subject of the work is

the expressivist theory: "Might not a poet be allowed to abandon a universal language and 'to use a peculiar language when expressing his feelings for his own gratification or that of men like himself?' To this, Wordsworth objects that 'Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men'" (p. 108). Wordsworth's warning not to aggrandize the insularity of poetry too much is well taken.

shown as it appears to one who is consumed by the feelings that the subject inspires, and the imaginative spectator is, through the help of the artist, moved towards a similar state-of-mind.

An example of this phenomena that Mill offers is of a lion being described by the painter or poet. The lion as art should not be seen through the eyes of a scientist or naturalist, which should be guided by the search for truth, but through the eyes of the artist, which pick out those aspects of the lion that best express the feelings of the artist. As a naturalist, we examine the lion to understand it – its behavior, biology, mechanical properties, etc.. The lion as aesthetic, however, becomes a sign – it points to something beyond it. If the artist has drawn it well, and if the appreciator has the requisite capacities for appreciation, the object acts on the imagination to indicate a state-of-mind. Thus the aspects of an object which are most properly aesthetic are those which best serve to signal the feelings of an observer (e.g. ‘What big claws and teeth you have!’), in contrast to those aspects which best serve science, i.e. those important in establishing causal laws. The aesthetic aspects are those which the imagination employs to transport the spectator into a state-of-mind like that of the artist.⁸

This reveals a central way that art aids in the cultivation of the feelings. The symbols and images of the artist, when felicitously chosen, act as catalysts for the observer of the artwork, such that even where a certain imaginative strength is lacking in the observer, the artist can facilitate the observer’s experiencing of the feelings that she felt in facing the original subject.

The key to aesthetic experience is how the object is confronted – what orientation the spectator brings to that confrontation. Mill’s writings on poetry seem to suggest that for us to ‘see’ the various potentially aesthetic aspects of an object *as* aesthetic, requires, above all, certain types of affective and imaginative capacity. The aesthetic experience is not primarily dependent on cognition. We are not developing beliefs about the object itself. We are not trying to determine whether a certain quality can be predicated of it. One feels the aesthetic value of a work or of a beautiful scene in nature through the operations of the imagination on our feelings.

To summarize: In Mill’s early writings on poetry, to encounter an object aesthetically is to see the object as bearing witness to the state-of-mind which presented it, namely the state-of-mind of the artist. The person who is capable of appreciating the work of art, then, is he who engages it with the appropriate capacity

⁸ There is good reason, therefore, to see aesthetic response, at least as characterized in Mill’s early theory, as a specific sort of idealized sympathy, namely, a sympathy with the artist’s particularly strong and impressive emotional states under the stimulus of some object.

for feeling and with a vigorous imagination. To confront the aesthetic aspects *as* aesthetic requires doing so as an affective, imaginative being, not as a cognizer (i.e. not primarily through the operation of reason on the senses). This marks a difference between moral perception – perception of rightness – which depends solely on reason and the senses (see, for ex., *CW*, X.51), and aesthetic perception, which rests on imagination. In addition, both the creation of art and the appreciation of it demand freedom from the distraction of social performance, that is, freedom from the complementary roles of rhetorician and of audience member. One needs to be able to lose oneself in the exploration of feeling if one is to truly perceive what such feelings are like.

This general position leaves certain questions unanswered, however. First of all, Mill's understanding of what distinguishes the aesthetic experience seems too broad. He was committed to an account, a commonplace in the period, in which the feeling associated with beauty⁹ is phenomenally distinct from other feelings. And yet, many apparently non-aesthetic experiences involve the expression of feelings – what makes the genesis of our aesthetic experience unique?

Mill's views also don't articulate well the similarity between our experiences of beauty in nature and in artworks. That a beautiful natural scene expresses an overflow of feeling by the artist is simply not credible, and Mill will want to be able to account for both kinds of beauty in similar ways.

To get some answers to these questions will require turning to Mill's more cursory later writings on aesthetic matters, in which he follows the lead of John Ruskin.

Ruskin

In the 1869 re-release of James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, which the son edited and contributed notes to, we find a couple of pages in comment on his father's position on the experience of beauty. In this section, we learn that James Mill had the misfortune of having to rely on Alison for aesthetics, not having the benefit of referring to "a deeper thinker than Alison," namely, Ruskin. "Mr. Ruskin, with profounder and more thoughtful views respecting the beauties both of Nature and of Art than any psychologist I could name, undertakes, in the second volume of *Modern Painters* to investigate the conditions of Beauty" (p.252-3). Ruskin is, in Mill's judgment, "to a very considerable degree successful

⁹ Though Mill was aware of other aesthetic categories, most obviously the sublime, he commonly fails to distinguish between the general aesthetic value of something and its beauty. I will continue this looseness here as I do not think it jeopardizes any of my arguments.

in making out his case” concerning beauty, and, in particular, in distinguishing beauty from agreeableness. A reconstruction of Mill’s aesthetic position requires contextualization by Ruskin. We are left, therefore, with the happy task of revisiting a sadly ignored masterpiece, both of prose and of criticism, *Modern Painters*.

Ruskin, in this second volume of *Modern Painters*, sees his object in the following way: “It is to summon the moral energies of the nation to a forgotten duty, to display the use, force, and function of a great body of neglected sympathies and desires, and to elevate to its healthy and beneficial operation that art, which, being altogether addressed to them, rises or falls with their variableness of vigor, – now leading them with Tyrtæan fire, now singing them to sleep with baby murmurings.”(3) This great duty, cultivating a sensitivity to beauty, ultimately amounts to furthering man’s “use and function,” which is “to be the witness of the glory of God, and to advance that glory by his reasonable obedience and resultant happiness,” (4). This permits us to comprehend the urgency behind Ruskin’s claim that the study of art and nature “is no recreation; it cannot be learned at spare moments, nor pursued when we have nothing better to do. It is no handiwork for drawing-room tables; no relief of the ennui of boudoirs; it must be understood and undertaken seriously or not at all.”(2)

Ruskin’s project in this part of his multi-volume work is to catalogue the ideas of beauty (i.e. those ideas which are expressed by the aesthetic object and which are responsible for our experience of the beautiful), and to elucidate the workings and proper objects of the two central faculties for the creation and appreciation of art, namely, the imagination and what he calls the “theoretic faculty”. The latter, which will be our focus, can be seen as approximating taste. It is the theoretic faculty which “is concerned with the moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty.”(10) He implores the reader not to think of it as the aesthetic faculty, because he believes that ‘aesthetic’ connotes a mere operation of sense, and sense is not capable of producing the experience of beauty. For the experience of beauty, is not found in mere sensual pleasure; it involves, first and foremost, the presence of the emotions which help make up the very idea of beauty, including joy, love of the object, and thankfulness and veneration towards the intelligence in which we perceive kindness – the kindness reflected in beautiful things. Beauty is not seen in the properties of objects alone, for beauty is not a straight-forwardly physical feature, as color or shape are. These properties must express some feature of the divine for the experience to be one of true beauty. They express them only to the observer who is prepared to see them, and without the proper theoretic faculty, we might notice

these properties of objects, and even find them agreeable, but we will never see the beauty.

The ideas of beauty are not perceived intellectually either, because the emotions helping to constitute ideas of beauty are not obtainable by or resultant from the intellect's operation. Our perception of beauty, rather than being sensual or intellectual, is a moral perception, "dependent on a pure, right, and open state of the heart, both for its truth and for its intensity" (17). Ruskin goes on to say, perhaps qualifying himself a little, that though those without pure hearts can have "naturally acute perceptions of the beautiful," they can never "comprehend it". The theoretic faculty, therefore, is primarily a moral faculty, and the pleasures of our experience of beauty are derived from "those material sources which are agreeable to our moral nature in its purity and perfection" (17). This emphasis on the moral informs, as one might expect, Ruskin's view of who can count as a good evaluator of beauty.

First, however, we need to look at what these ideas of beauty, whose perception is essential to the experience of beauty, are. Ruskin suggests that, if we can be reasonably sure that the objects of our concern are producing the same sensations in different observers – and this we can only be aware of through careful self-reflection – we should be able to "reason..as well as feel..out" the qualities of material objects "which are calculated to give us this universal pleasure" (p.27). This involves shearing off those qualities which make something accidentally or temporarily pleasant, until we are left with those things which beautiful objects have in common with one another, "which we may then safely affirm to be the cause of its ultimate and true delightfulness" (ibid.). Note that the classification of these ideas supplies a want in Mill's earlier views, because it tells us more about what features in the object trigger an aesthetic experience.

Ruskin's analysis leads him to put forward two broad categories: typical and vital beauty. Typical beauty, so called because it typifies or expresses divine attributes, is a category covering some external qualities of bodies which are absolutely identical in all things in which they occur – stone, flower, beast, or man – whether in nature or as represented in artworks (29). It is the beauty of "mere material loveliness" (38) as it gestures towards perfection. Vital beauty is, alternatively, "the appearance of felicitous fulfillment of function in living things, more especially of the joyful and right exertion of perfect life in man" (29). Whereas typical beauty depends on lines and colors, the formal elements of the theoretic objects, vital beauty depends upon functions inherent in the organism (94).

Ruskin admits that there are myriad ways in which, whether by arbitrary association or by "typical resemblance" [what is at stake in that distinction?], matter may

“remind us of moral perfections” (38). Nevertheless, there appear to be a few modes which regularly manifest themselves, whereby this class of experiences of beauty may be explained. The varieties of typical beauty include those arising from the divine types of infinity, unity, repose, symmetry, purity, and moderation.

To illustrate more concretely what Ruskin is talking about, we can begin with the experience connected to infinity, or the “type of divine incomprehensibility” (38). The paradigmatic cases of this experience generally arise from certain effects of light, particularly the light of “the declining or breaking day” and the luminous backgrounds of certain paintings. Such a light is sought by the eye, and perceived with “a deeper feeling of the beautiful....a deeper feeling, I say, not perhaps more acute, but having more of spiritual hope and longing, less of animal and present life” (40). The effects of light here, then, suggest various ideas of infinity, i.e. of incomprehensibility, which inspire reverence. It is telling, and it certainly would have resonated with Mill, that Ruskin draws a contrast between animality, understood as focus on the immediate and everyday, with what one must assume is humanity, characterized by yearning and a reaching out to the divine. This is similar to distinctions between ordinariness (animality, machines) and transcendence (humanity) that can be found again and again in Mill’s ethical writing,¹⁰ and which are often paired, as we shall see, with the contrast between the experience of agreeableness and the experience of beauty.

Symmetry, something frequently associated with beauty, is characterized by Ruskin as the type of divine justice, understood as the opposition of equal quantities to each other (vs. proportion, which is the connection of unequal quantities with each other, and which plays a central role in unity as an idea of beauty). Symmetry is only a mode of arrangement, and thus a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of beauty. There are, after all, numerous symmetrical and yet ugly things, including “many Elizabethan ornaments” (73). Where symmetry is absent, however, the effects of passion and violence are increased. These latter emotions, though they may be important in many things we value about art (its ability to provoke us, or its cathartic value), conflict with the experience of beauty. This is also apparent in the idea of repose, which is opposed to passion, change, or laborious exertion. Beauty, among other things, is never violent, never unbalanced, and it almost never involves struggle.

Lastly, moderation, like symmetry, is not itself productive of beauty, but its want is destructive of all beauty. Similar to symmetry, its absence is reflected in violence

¹⁰ As some of many examples, see the penultimate paragraph of the *Logic*, chapter 3 of *On Liberty*, and comments in “Theism”, CW, X.484-5

or extravagance. Such lack gives rise to that which “in color we call glaring, in form inelegant, in motion ungraceful, in language coarse, in thought undisciplined, in all unchastened; which qualities are in everything most painful, because the signs of disobedient and irregular operation” (84). This quote, which also provides us with a nice list of the adjectives assignable to the ugly, reveals that a pleasing and important quality of beautiful objects is the expression of a kind of self-command, a government by law.

Typical beauty, of which I have given only some instances, is thus that in matter which expresses various divine or moral perfections, which are “the inevitable stamp of his image on what he creates” (87). These perfections are the perfections of a particular aspect or group of aspects of an object (e.g. infinity), or those of the relationships which hold among different aspects (e.g. symmetry).

Turning briefly to vital beauty, Ruskin summarizes it as follows: “Throughout the whole of the organic creation every being in a perfect state exhibits certain appearances, or evidences, of happiness, and besides is in its nature, its desires, its modes of nourishment, habitation, and death, illustrative or expressive of certain moral dispositions or principles” (89). Through our sympathy with the happiness of organic beings (happiness being understood as the discharge of its function, with the virtues appropriate to that function – not happiness in terms of mere flourishing or pleasure), we look upon those creatures as most lovely who are also most happy. In addition, vital beauty is detected in the moral lessons that a creature is meant to provide, allowing us to class them “in orders of worthiness and beauty according to the rank and nature of that lesson” (90). Vital beauty, even more than typical beauty, is therefore dependent upon a theologically-grounded view of nature and of creatures as designed – a position that has an interesting place in Mill’s thought, as will be shown in a moment.

Though vital beauty may be a partial exception, it should be evident that Ruskin, along with Mill, does not find fundamentally different conceptions of beauty in nature and in the fine arts (however the imagination of the artist can offer us images or sounds which, having passed under the shadow of the artistic imagination, take on a different color than those found in nature alone). Insofar as art and nature were both seen as designed – Ruskin and Mill were still pre-Darwinian in this respect – aesthetic appreciation did not take on a fundamentally different character

when moved from natural to artistic objects. The coherency of such a view, particularly now, is weak at best.¹¹

Now that we have a preliminary sense of what aspects of objects can be said to be responsible for their beauty, the question arises: What is it that makes one sensitive to beauty, that allows one, among other things, to fulfill this great duty of bearing witness to God's beneficence? First of all, the observer must "above all things" possess earnestness and feeling (173). Without these, one can never approach an artwork or a scene in nature and appreciate it properly. Lacking earnestness implies an inability to take the object of appreciation seriously enough. Either one will never be able to give it enough sustained attention, or the attention will be directed towards ends beyond the experience of the object (fighting off ennui, for example).

A dearth of feeling, on the other hand, means a deadness and blindness to beauty. We cannot coolly and from an emotional distance evaluate the beauty of an object in the way we might perceive its physical properties. Without feeling, the world is empty of aesthetic value. Feeling makes aesthetic perception possible.¹² Absent the emotions mentioned earlier that characterize the operations of the theoretic faculty, we are only able to experience the merely animal pleasure of sensibility.

In addition to being earnest and primarily affective, true taste, according to Ruskin, is always capable of being astonished. It is open to beauty in all its forms, wherever it may be: back alley, rustic field, or museum. The purity of our taste is testable by this universality, i.e. by its ability to find beauty wherever it may look. True taste does not heed social distinctions or common opinion. False taste, on the other hand, is fastidious, full of pride and condescension, and remains far too aware of its own operation (presumably because it is aware of its being evaluated by others). It performs for others in what we could call a 'rhetorical mode', and thus generally fails to evaluate rightly, not being in the right spirit. False taste often misses much that would be worthy of it. The continuity of these views with Mill's earlier writings – the emphasis on sincerity, on quiet, earnest contemplation, on freedom from attitudes of social performance – is noticeable.

Another social danger to true taste is the problematic influence of custom, which can reconcile human nature "to many things naturally painful to it, and even im-

¹¹ For an interesting treatment of the relationship between aesthetic appreciation of art and nature, see Allen Carlson, "Appreciating art and appreciating nature" in *Landscape, natural beauty and the arts*, p.199-227; edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, C.U.P., 1993.

¹² This helps to explain Ruskin's frequent jibes against his Gradgrindian caricature of utilitarianism – a caricature that Mill detested, and yet found some truth in. That Ruskin was such a strong opponent of utilitarianism, as he understood it, and of associationism, makes Mill's praise of him all that much more remarkable.

proper for it” (24). Though the cultivation of our judgment must begin by depending on authority to tell us what is good and bad,¹³ custom and authority must ultimately give way to an “openness of heart, which proves all things”.

Lastly, the process of forming right taste demands that one be distrustful enough of oneself to “be ready to believe and try all things, and yet so trustful of itself, that it will neither quit what it has tried, nor take anything without trying” (25). The process of forming one’s taste is, for Ruskin, a central task in the formation of one’s soul, and his language reflects that. Having good taste can almost be identified with being a good person, because the former, in many respects, requires the latter.

Ruskin, then, does two things which are of special import for us. First of all, he articulates and emphasizes the central connection of beauty to perfection. Our experience of beauty is best understood as being constituted by our engagement with the perfection expressed, more or less opaquely, in aesthetic objects. This will be fundamental for comprehending the meaning of aestheticization in Mill’s thought. Secondly, Ruskin’s portrait of the good aesthete reinforces the anti-rhetoric strand of Mill’s earlier theory, while expanding it to include the observer of art, as well, not just the artwork and the artist. The earnestness, purity, and depth of feeling in the person of true taste is understood through contrast to social performance. Concern about taste involves a concern about how much one’s aesthetic judgment is constituted by specifically social influences. The role of aesthete, just like that of poet or painter, is best characterized through a relation to a work of art or to a natural scene, not through a relation to other people.

Later Aesthetic Theory

Though Mill objected to some of the theological/metaphysical components of Ruskin’s theory, he thought that the mechanics of it (the ideas of beauty, etc.), reinterpreted through associationism, were fundamentally correct. This gives us an opportunity to render Mill’s later aesthetic views with a bit more sharpness than would have been possible had we simply focused on his theories of poetry.

A basic contention in aesthetics of this time is that there is a phenomenological difference between the pleasure one gets in aesthetic experience from other sorts of pleasures. The central problem in aesthetic analysis (one solved for Ruskin by appeal to ideas of beauty), is giving an account of what causes the feelings which arise

¹³ The appropriateness of submitting ourselves to authority is demonstrated in our learning of any complex practice: chess playing, the violin, a martial art. The difficulty, as Ruskin points out, is knowing the balance between proper submission, stumbling about because one has ignored received wisdom, and being a slave to custom.

from aesthetic experience to be different from those that originate in other types of experience, particularly in the experience of the agreeable.

As an example of an aesthetic encounter, Mill offers a screen of trees in windy country. Though Mill is not wholly explicit on this point, there seem to be three ways in which the trees may produce pleasure. The first would be through the sensation itself, anterior to association. The colors of the tree, a deep green or brown, would be one possible instance. Mill recalls “the intense and mysterious delight which in early childhood I had in the colours of certain flowers; a delight far exceeding any I am now capable of receiving from colour of any description, with all its acquired associations” (p.247). There is a “direct element of physical pleasure” which associations simply do not give, and yet which is potentially available in our encounter with the trees. It is also no accident that this form of aesthetic experience is most closely linked to childhood, where our emotive and cognitive lives are much less nuanced and much less constituted by the accretions of association that build up over time. This direct sensual experience depends almost entirely on openness, on the absence of the cognitive and emotive friction exerted by adults on most of their sensory input.

His brief discussion of music makes a similar point. Mill disagrees with his father’s contention that all the power that music and the human voice have to please derive from the associations connected with them, and asserts the following: “That very much of the pleasure afforded by Music is the effect of its expression, i.e. of the associations connected with sound, most people will admit: but it can scarcely be doubted that there is also an element of direct physical and sensual pleasure” (p. 242). He goes on to argue that single sounds, harmony or lack thereof, and various melodies, can be, in themselves, agreeable or disagreeable. “With these pleasures those of the associated ideas and feelings are intimately blended, but may, to a certain extent, be discriminated by a critical ear. It is possible to say,” he goes on, “of different composers, that one (as Beethoven) excels most in that part of the effect of music which depends on expression, and another (as Mozart) in the physical part” (ibid.). Interestingly, this seems to represent something of a change in his judgment of Mozart since his youthful writings. Whereas before Mozart was the great poet of musicians, now his music is presented as excelling, not in the expression of emotion, which is where the true poetry would lie, but in its merely sensual aspect.

The second form of pleasure that the trees can provide is the pleasure of agreeableness. One example of this might be the pleasure resulting from an association of the screen of trees with ideas such as warmth, comfort, and shelter – those things involved in pleurably getting us through everyday life, and those things, concur-

ring with Ruskin, more associated with our animality. As Mill argues, the state of consciousness made up of the associations of common-place and every-day pleasures will not have as elevated a character as a state “made up of reminiscences of such ideas as Mr. Ruskin specifies, and of the grand and interesting objects and thoughts connected with ideas like those,” (XXXI.224). This form of imaginative engagement with our environment is commonplace. It demands no particularly rare or deep affective capacity to enjoy. We are almost all familiar with the simple pleasures common to humans. In such a scenario, those aspects of the trees that an observer attends to are those which lend themselves to a particular sort of imagining. We make present to ourselves the situation of comfort, and the pleasant feelings we experience result from our imagining of the feelings that such situations provide.

The last way of perceiving such trees pleurably is in relation to their beauty. First of all, it should be noted that Mill thought, along with almost every aesthetic thinker of the age, that the experience of beauty was phenomenologically distinguishable from the experience of mere agreeableness; so an important aspect of his account will have to be what separates the two kinds of experience. Those elements of the trees which constitute its beauty “appeal to other, and what we are accustomed, not without meaning, to call higher, parts of our nature; which give a stronger stimulus and a deeper delight to the imagination, because the ideas they call up are such as in themselves act on the imagination with greater force” (ibid.). Here, then, Mill draws on Ruskin’s ideas of beauty, particularly the notion of typical beauty. He suggests that our awareness, though often “vague and confused,” of the ideas of beauty (infinity, symmetry, unity, etc.) is required for aesthetic perception.

But what is so special about this type of idea rather than others? Why couldn’t other ideas serve the same purpose? The answer to this is relatively straight-forward. With the special exception of infinity, which, by suggesting power or magnitude without limit, “acquires an otherwise strange impressiveness to the feelings and imagination” (225), the ideas of beauty “all represent to us some valuable or delightful attribute, in a completeness and perfection of which our experience presents us with no example, and which therefore stimulates the active power of the imagination to rise above known reality, into a more attractive or a more majestic world” (ibid.). This will generally mean that we see or feel, more or less vaguely, the objects evoking these ideas as expressing aspects of human or natural perfection.¹⁴ Our

¹⁴ Though Mill speaks of divine perfection with much more reticence than Ruskin, the operative general principles are the same.

imaginative encounter with these perfections produces the pleasures considered distinctly aesthetic.

“Lower pleasures,” on the contrary, including pleasures of agreeableness, do not stimulate “the active power of the imagination to rise above known reality, into a more attractive or a more majestic world...To them there is a fixed limit at which they stop: or if, in any particular case, they do acquire, by association, a power of stirring up ideas greater than themselves, and stimulate the imagination to enlarge its conceptions to the dimensions of those ideas, we then feel that the lower pleasure has, exceptionally, risen into the region of the aesthetic, and has superadded to itself an element of pleasure or a character and quality not belonging to its own nature” (ibid.).

A lower pleasure, like those tied to the sensation of rich colors, the harmonies of a Mozart piano concerto, or the comfort implied by a screen of trees, does not provoke us beyond our “known reality,” and cannot do so without the aid of certain associated ideas of the sort that Ruskin reveals. If a particular object does not conduce to the production of these ideas, which might be said to act as our points of access to other imaginative horizons, then the pleasure will not be an aesthetic one.¹⁵ Mill has, therefore, with Ruskin’s help, identified more clearly than he had in his earlier works on poetry and art, what generates the uniqueness of the aesthetic experience.

A possible conflict with his earlier views arises, however. Mill argues that Ruskin brings out “that every thing which gives us the emotion of the Beautiful, is expressive and emblematic of one or other of certain lofty or lovely ideas, which are, in his apprehension, embodied in the universe, and correspond to the various perfections of its Creator,” (p.253). The problem is that, whereas his writings on poetry spoke of the aesthetic aspects of an object expressing a state-of-mind (i.e. the feelings of

¹⁵ These passages, which have been sadly ignored in the growing mound of articles on the higher/lower pleasure distinction, could eventually, I believe, help to clear up some of the discussions about it. Susan Feagin has made one of the only serious attempts to incorporate Mill’s aesthetics and the passages in the Analysis into a reading of higher and lower pleasures [see “Mill and Edwards on the Higher Pleasures” in *Philosophy* 58, 1983, pp. 244-252]. It is a good start. One caution, however, is that she has too quickly generalized, in my opinion, from the structure of aesthetic higher pleasures to that of higher pleasures broadly considered. Other than the problem of a lack of textual evidence either way, it seems to be a theory which does not make appropriate phenomenological distinctions among possible sources of the higher pleasures like pleasures of friendship, moral feelings, and intellectual pleasures. I find it hard to make sense of those pleasures with the notion of perfections alone, and I see no reason why Mill should be saddled with such a view.

the artist), here, the aesthetic qualities of the object express various specific, grand, ideas.

This is an issue about the content of art. What, if anything, is art about? In “What is Poetry?”, art was about affective states-of-mind. The artwork essentially serves as a vehicle for communicating emotion. Under Ruskin’s tutelage, Mill seems to have changed his view. The question is how much. My tendency is to read it more as an expansion and development rather than a definitive rejection of the earlier account. Now, rather than expressing emotions directly, art expresses ideas which impact the emotions through their effect on the imagination. The focus moves from the artist and her states-of-mind to various sorts of perfection.¹⁶ In the appreciator of art, the spotlight is placed even more sharply on the imagination.

This is another way of working out how the symbols and images of the aesthetic object affect the spectator, and what makes that effect distinctively aesthetic. The ideas of beauty give Mill an arguably more robust set of conceptual resources through which he can characterize what marks out aspects of an object as potentially aesthetic. Whereas in his earlier writings he determines that the characteristic of the artwork is its expression of feeling through images that are amenable to it, here, by drawing on Ruskin’s account, he gives a richer story of what we can expect these images and symbols that evoke the imagination to be like. Moreover, by focusing on the ideas of beauty, he is provided with a more palatable theory of what makes the aesthetic experience of beauty in nature similar to that in the artwork. Beauties in nature and in art are not the expressions of emotions per se – this would make little sense for nature¹⁷ – they are the expressions of different kinds of perfections and qualities that provoke the imagination to vigorous activity, thus producing those “imposing” feelings typical of beauty. These emotions, in turn, act to signal the presence of beauty.

Where we have a work of art, rather than a natural object, it may still frequently be helpful to see the work as involving a state-of-mind, namely, the state-of-mind of the artist, under the influence of the ideas of beauty. This feeling acts to shape the way in which the object represented in the work of art is presented (e.g. the lion).

¹⁶ It is true that this change could be represented more dramatically as a shift away from an expressivist aesthetic theory to a reformulated imitative theory. I am unsure that this would be a helpful way of conceptualizing it for our purposes.

¹⁷ Though it is difficult to see nature as the expression of feeling, as that would compromise a number of traditional understandings of God, particularly in the Christian tradition, it should be remembered that this does not undermine a basic similarity in the aesthetic experiences of nature and art for Mill. Again, this may be connected to a willingness to see nature, like the work of art, as a product of design.

But if the work of art is genuinely good and executed well, any experience of it that is aesthetic will be mediated by the ideas of beauty.

We might be able to integrate Mill's earlier view with his later one by emphasizing that the artist's state of mind could be seen, albeit loosely, as a type of perfection that is representable in a work. The artist, in other words, attempts to bring the expression of a particularly striking example of an emotion into whatever medium she uses. Whether this synthesis gets off the ground or not, it should be clear that the center of gravity in Mill's aesthetics has shifted from emotions to the notion of perfection, with the imagination remaining at the core.

We should now be able to give a preliminary answer to the question: What does it mean to perceive something aesthetically? For Mill, imagination grounds aesthetic perception. We identify specifically aesthetic imagining by starting with those feelings and experiences which are distinctly aesthetic and giving an analysis of their genesis in the imagination. Such an analysis reveals that aesthetic imaginative activity, as opposed to the imagination's activity in mere daydreaming, in the pleasures of agreeableness, or that involved in sympathy [see chapter 1], is characterized by a sensitivity to perfections of various kinds, expressed in certain features of aesthetic objects categorized by the ideas of beauty, which provoke the imagination into a 'higher realm'. Such activity is made possible only through a specific orientation to observing – an orientation that is given content by its opposition to social performance. The good aesthetic observer is reflective, earnest, and, like the artist, engaged in soliloquy. Moreover, the aesthetic object, if ever it turns out to the observer, loses its truth and power. This has special import for us, because in the process of aestheticizing the self, one must become aesthetician, artist, *and* object.

II. Aestheticizing the Self

The Self as Work of Art

The emphasis on perfection as a core aesthetic category is strikingly exemplified in Mill's definition of art in the late "Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews", and it introduces the first, and the less general, of the two levels at which the self should be considered aesthetically. Discussing the relationship of the beautiful and the good in the context of defending aesthetic education, Mill suggests that we can think of the beautiful, if we are careful, as greater than the good, because "it is the Good made perfect, and fitted with all the collateral perfections which make it a finished and completed thing" (CW, XXI.255). This sense of perfection "which would make us demand from every creation of man the very utmost

that it ought to give, and render us intolerant of the smallest fault in ourselves or in anything we do, is one of the results of Art cultivation” (ibid.). Aesthetic education prods us to a sensitivity of perfection, and, in particular, a sensitivity to its absence.

We come to see our lives from an aesthetic point of view when we “feel...the absence of noble aims and endeavours, as not merely blameable but also degrading”(254). It is important that we *feel* the absence of these noble aims and endeavours, just as we *feel* the presence of beauty – a feeling with its source in the ideas of beauty. This absence is only *known* derivatively, through the mediation of the feeling and the imagination, because the presence or absence of beauty is not inferable by reason from the information offered by the senses. To approach ourselves aesthetically, like approaching a landscape aesthetically, is to consider ourselves as we appear to imagination; and the imagination is most active when confronted with those features which suggest perfections and greatness (or, in the case of ugliness, the negation of these things, not the mere absence).

As the artist (including God, in the realm of nature) acts to facilitate our engagement with the ideas of beauty, so too do the beauties of art and nature offered by a good aesthetic education facilitate our taking our own lives as appropriate objects for aesthetic evaluation. Having experienced the grandeur of a Janacek string quartet, or the force of a Sophoclean tragedy, can lead one to begin wondering about the way in which our own lives inspire or fail to inspire our imaginations. Does my life embody ideas of beauty and elicit similar aesthetic feelings? It is no longer only the painting, the poem, or the flower which demand an aesthetic gaze.

We cannot be satisfied with the gaze alone, however. One of the obvious differences with art appreciation is that part of the point of viewing ourselves aesthetically is not only to be a critic of ourselves, but to be an artist of ourselves. That is, there is a shift from merely observing in a particular way to shaping ourselves on the basis of that observation.

Mill frames artistic activity by defining art as “the endeavour after perfection in execution” (256). No other human productions “come so near to perfection as works of pure Art,” because “perfection is itself the object” of the artistic activity (255-6). The connection of art with the self is made even more explicit: “Art, when really cultivated, and not merely practised empirically, maintains, what it first gave the conception of, an ideal Beauty, to be eternally aimed at, though surpassing what can be actually attained; and by this idea it trains us never to be completely satisfied with imperfection in what we ourselves do and are: to idealize, as much as possible, every work we do, and most of all, our own characters and lives,” (ibid.). Thus, our

initial pass at the problem shows us the following: we treat ourselves artistically on this first level of the self when we set perfection as our individual goal.

This, of course, presents us with a number of new questions. The most pressing is what it means to set perfection as a goal. How is perfection to be understood? Is it the same for all people? Is it a natural category, a divine one (as in Ruskin's theory), or a cultural one? As a start, we could begin with Mill's example of the differences between a craftsman acting like a workman versus acting as an artist. In the latter case, the craftsman's striving for perfection in execution shows itself in the final product, which bears the marks of being done as if the craftsman "loved it, and tried to make it as good as possible, though something less good would have answered the purpose for which it was ostensibly made" (ibid.).

To get more concrete, think of the example of a table that a furniture maker is producing. The craftsperson as artist tries to make the table better than it would need to be for the purposes it is ostensibly to serve. What are those purposes? A good dining table serves as a place to put books, papers, toys, plates and silverware. It will be stable, won't have some legs shorter than others, and will last for years. What turns a table into a work of art? The artist has to make it as good as possible, but good being understood, presumably, in a way different than the purposes it serves alone. It's not that a table that is a work of art is simply better at serving as a place for plates and newspapers, or that it is more stable and longer lasting. As a matter of fact, a table qua artwork may not do some of the things of which a more utilitarian table might be capable. It could lose some of its stability for the sake of design, for example.

For the table to be a product of artistic activity, the craftsman must have appeared to attend to it lovingly, being driven more, if we may speak this way, by the logic of the making, rather than by that of the mere use. That is, the artist will often spend hours on things that the normal user of the table might never really notice or come across, because the form or nature of this particular table seems to demand it. Carving or sanding the underside of the table, for example, until it is perfectly smooth and even. This may also involve 'listening' to the demands made by the particular pieces of wood themselves, and letting them, to an extent, dictate the form of the final product. The table, then, must reflect a maker for whom the physical product and the activity of making it have an intrinsic worth.

The artist who sees the intrinsic worth of the activity of making can be contrasted with those who sell tables to make a living and for whom the activity of table-making is dominated by that end. For such a person, the making of the table is merely instrumental to getting money. The act of making the table is not an artistic

one (though that person and his family may profit more financially in the long run, while the wife and children of the artist suffer for the sake of his art). In such a case, the standards of what counts as good or bad table-making derive largely from what will sell. This means that the craftsperson will concentrate more on what the customer might care about rather than what a skilled table-maker would notice in trying to determine whether the table was well made and beautiful.¹⁸

For the artist, however, the activity, while it is engaged in, is done for the sake of excellence. And the standards of excellence are provided by the activity of table-making itself, understood through its history, the particular materials being worked on, etc.. In terms of perception, we may say that the artist attends to those things necessary to excellence in table-making, things that are most often learned by watching good craftspeople work and by working along with them. Fundamentally, this means that the artist occupies a different point-of-view from the workman, namely, the point of view in which the activity and the thing being worked on are looked at with attention to how they can be made perfect according to standards internal to the activity, rather than according to standards of the purposes provided by the market. Striving for excellence means having a general disregard for the consequences that arise after the activity is completed, e.g. whether the table will sell or not.¹⁹

But is a table an appropriate analogy for life? There seems to be a much better defined tradition in table-making to articulate what perfection in table-making might approximate. There are recognized experts in the field (if anyone doubts this, I suggest a glance at any Thos. Moser catalogue). Can we, as artists of our own lives, draw on these kinds of resources?

There are some general rules for those who undertake such a venture. First of all, we have duties, which act to constrain our pursuit of perfection. Mill thinks that duties can be pretty easily demarcated, which is part of the reason that there is general agreement about them among the different schools of philosophical ethics. Duties are defined, following Bentham, by their relation to punishment, that is, duties are those things the violation of which demands punishment of some kind. Any drive to self-perfection is bounded by morality, just as the imagination is supposed to remain within the fortifications established by reason (see chapter 1).

¹⁸ There is a similarity here to the advice given to students preparing for the math portion of the S.A.T.: 'The computer doesn't know if your proof to the problem is elegant, all it knows is whether the right bubble is filled in'.

¹⁹ On this point, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd Edition, p. 198; University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

Secondly, beyond the obvious dictates of prudence, we can also draw distinctions among different kinds of pleasures. The higher/lower pleasure distinction puts forward general guidelines for self-shaping. If one ends up trying to perfect aspects of oneself that favor activity which is not overly conducive to the experience of higher pleasures, the distinction provides a reason to change direction. Clearly, though, a rough, qualitative grouping of pleasures strongly underdetermines our choice among different kinds of life.

Beyond these two things, there is not too much more in the way of recommendations holding generally. At this point, the focus becomes the particular. We need to understand ourselves well enough to detect our strengths and weaknesses, the overall makeup of our character, including the interrelations of the various aspects of it, and the extant possibilities for self-development. Mill indicates this, most obviously in *On Liberty*, through his gesturing to the (Romantic) notion of individual nature. Each person has their own nature.²⁰ What one must concentrate on is developing one's particular powers and abilities. This will be a different process for different natures, and society, since the development of individuality is of central importance for humanity, must be structured in such a way that it reflects these differences and allows for them. Perceiving myself aesthetically in this sense requires that I aim to perfect my nature, i.e. those aspects which are most distinctly me.

To be good at this, one must have, along with the will to carry out difficult projects, a keen aesthetic sensibility. One's imagination must be attuned to those aspects of oneself which may undermine the grandeur of one's life, or which may make one's life positively degraded. Imagination must possess a sensitivity to Ruskin's ideas of beauty. And just as these ideas may be found embodied throughout nature in all its varieties, so too can they take different forms in the multiplicity

²⁰ An additional connection with the aesthetic can be shown here. In his essay on Sedgwick, Mill stresses that a central reason to study poetry and the arts is to make up for a basic weakness present in the study of the sciences and in the development of analytical ability more generally. Analysis not only weakens or destroys the associations that make social feelings and relations possible, but also, "by accustoming the mind to consider, in objects, chiefly the properties on account of which we refer them to classes and give them general names, leaves our conceptions of them as individuals lame and meagre" (CW, X.39). The correctives to this tendency to abstraction are those pursuits which deal with objects "altogether in the concrete, clothed in properties and circumstances", namely, observation of "real life in its most varied forms," poetry, and art. The latter are essential, therefore, in inculcating that attentiveness which makes possible our coming to feel and know what our individual nature is like. We need to be able to see, not only how we are similar to others, how we easily fit into the label 'human being', but also how we differ – what makes our own situation not amenable to the application of the general rules of common wisdom.

of human lives. But this sensitivity requires the grounding conditions for perceptual virtues discussed by Ruskin, namely, an earnestness, a willingness to be surprised, a carefully modulated relationship to authority and to the social more generally, etc.. Exactly what we should be attending to in ourselves cannot be captured in general rules. How we should go about making ourselves capable of such attending can be.²¹

Lastly, we should note that at this level of taking the self aesthetically, i.e. the level of trying to perfect one's individual nature, the contrast in Mill's early aesthetic writing of poetry with rhetoric needs to be emphasized. Like the artist, our life ought not to be shaped with too great an attention to the social. As a work of art, life is not heard, but overheard.

This must be immediately qualified, of course: Mill's associationism places a great deal of emphasis on the formation of the self by environment, so our natures are not present prior to our engagement with others. Our notions of excellence and ideals of perfection, though susceptible to critique and reflective reconstruction, are constituted in large part through our relation to history and culture.

Nevertheless, part of Mill's emphasis on the aestheticizing of life must, I contend, be read through the lens of his anxiety about mass society. There are numerous examples of this in Mill's writing, but one that is particularly relevant for our purposes is presented in *The Subjection of Women*. In arguing for the desirability of an ideal of marriage of which mutual respect and admiration serve as the distinguishing marks, Mill suggests that the man who desires "to attain exalted virtue," and "to be better than public opinion requires him to be," (p.96) will find a wife his inferior in intelligence "a perpetual dead weight, or, worse than a dead weight, a drag," because the wife will be the "auxiliary of the common public opinion". She will strive for

²¹ On this point see the *Logic*, III.7.1, and Mill's discussion of observation in science: "It would be possible to point out what qualities of mind, and modes of mental culture, fit a person for being a good observer: that, however, is a question not of Logic, but of the Theory of Education, in the most enlarged sense of the term. There is not properly an Art of Observing. There may be rules for observing. But these, like rules for inventing, are properly instructions for the preparation of one's own mind; for putting it into the state in which it will be most fitted to observe, or most likely to invent. They are, therefore, essentially rules of self-education, which is a different thing from Logic. They do not teach how to do the thing, but how to make ourselves capable of doing it. They are an art of strengthening the limbs, not an art of using them."

“consideration” instead of perfection. A man with children and such a wife “has given hostages to Mrs. Grundy” (p.97).²²

What is the contrast between consideration and perfection? Here, we are able to get more concrete about what it actually means to attend to aspects of ourselves which can be treated aesthetically by the imagination versus those which cannot. Consideration and perfection essentially recapitulate in ethical life the contrast between agreeableness and beauty in aesthetics. Just as ideas like comfort, warmth, and shelter ground the pleasures of agreeableness, so similarly the wife concerned with consideration calls her husband’s attention to those features of himself valued by society and for successfully navigating the course of quotidian existence, namely, whether his political views are distasteful to others, if he “has the reputation of mingling in low radical politics” (p.98), if he obtains the invitations and honours that others do, if he has done something which “hinders George [their son] from getting a commission or a place”, or which prevents “Caroline [their daughter] from making an advantageous match”. She offers little support or encouragement when his desire to be virtuous, or his desire to endeavor after perfection, jeopardizes the “sole return” that society makes to her for a life of “continued self-sacrifice”. Eventually, he may no longer even be able to see himself aesthetically, having been reduced to that “mediocrity of respectability which is becoming a marked characteristic of modern times”. He will shape himself rhetorically rather than artistically, i.e. with special attention to his audience, which dispenses the consideration that he has come to value so much.

Perfection, then, captures the imagination in a very different way than does consideration. It is associated with those ideal conceptions of character and action (e.g. the gentleness and kindness of Christ, the wisdom and self-control of Socrates, the almost frightening sense of justice in Brutus, etc.), which are exemplified in various histories, religious texts, biographies, poems, novels and dramas. The imagination is struck by the ease with which these figures lead it to a “higher world”, one which brings out, as does our experience of the beautiful, the exhilarating possibilities latent in our humanity – possibilities not found when we dwell upon consideration, i.e. social acceptance, material success, etc.. These possibilities seem to be, I would suggest, the virtues characteristic of those qualities “which are the distinctive endowment of a human being” (*On Liberty*, p.55), including judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, expansive sympathy, moral preference, and, most im-

²² Mrs. Grundy, according to Susan Okin: “A character in Thomas Morton’s play *Speed the Plough* (1798), who represents the censoring opinions of the rigidly respectable”; John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, ed. Susan Okin; Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988; p.97.

portantly, the capacity of choice. The person trying to be an artist of her own life must emulate the perfections of these capacities found in the great figures of history and literature, but always with an attention to her particularity, that is, to what possibilities of greatness are ready to be expressed by her own individual nature. With the right kind of aesthetic sensibility, fostered by an appropriately robust aesthetic education, she will avoid degradation and wallowing in animality,²³ because she will be aware of the absence of grandeur and nobility in the picture that her life presents. Moreover, if her intellectual education has kept apace, there will be no collapse into a sentimentalism that jeopardizes morality (morality depending, of course, on our clear-sighted, rational estimation of consequences and on our acceptance of the connected duties).

The first level of the aestheticized self can thus be understood as helping to demarcate a realm of authenticity in opposition to the superficiality of the mass. Whereas social life (and the state, as Humboldt, Mill, and de Tocqueville note) exerts constant pressure towards uniformity, towards that efficiency of communication and transaction which arises from settled expectation about the behavior and attitudes of others, authenticity depends on individuality, on norms that are not congruent with the norms that make social life function well. For Mill, we are only a genuine self – we only have a genuine character – insofar as we differentiate this self from unconscious unity with society. Vital to this process is the emergence of our intellectual powers, whose dissolving powers help free us from being “the dupe of every superficial appearance” (CW, X.39). But equally important is that attunement to our nature characterized by the aesthetic activity of the imagination. This means seeing ourselves as works of art, with all that implies, rather than primarily as incorporated into a social world.

I would be loathe to leave this subject without at least hinting at the genuine costs of a view of life as art that Mill tries to cover over with the oppositions of perfection, virtue, and self-reflective art with consideration, mediocrity and the audience of rhetoric. It is very easy to denigrate alternatives to Mill’s position by invok-

²³ Throughout his writings, but especially in chapter 3 of *On Liberty* and chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism*, Mill closely ties animal imagery to unthinking absorption in mass society. Sheep, cows, pigs, apes – along with steam engines, automatons and sundry other machines – are all paraded out as contrasts to the noble life of the authentic individual. Interestingly, the contrasts of animality with humanity and of mass consciousness with authentic individuality are replicated in the contrast of agreeableness with beauty. Only humans can experience the latter, and this experience depends not on associations that connect to everyday life, but ones which direct us to a ‘higher world’. Beauty is not only closely allied with individuality and humanity, it helps constitute them.

ing the Mrs. Grundys of the world. As the stoics understood, the true philosopher – a life artist – is ridiculed. This ridicule undoubtedly arises because the philosopher threatens the fluidity and ease of social transactions and complicates our expectations for the behavior of others. Someone striving for perfection can throw sand in the gears of the only machine that we all need to work.

The Self as Immortal and Part of a Divine Whole

At the Festival of the Supreme Being (designed by that artist of paintings and of pageants, Jacques-Louis David, who embodied that capacity for rhetorical power for which Mill chastised the French), Robespierre set fire to a statue of Atheism out of which emerged the statue of Wisdom. According to Furet, the leader of the Jacobins then declared that by purging Atheism from their midst, “man could be rescued from the desolating Hebertist creed (that death leaves nothing but ‘separated molecules’) and returned to the belief that it is possible to ‘link this transitory life to God himself and to immortality’. ‘Man, whoever you are’, concluded Robespierre, ‘you may still conceive great ideas about yourself.’”²⁴ Though Mill was a student of French history and of the Revolution in particular, I very much doubt that he had this speech in mind when he wrote the final section of “Theism” some 75 years after the 1794 event. Nevertheless, there are striking parallels.

Along with emphasizing the aesthetic at the level of striving for perfection in our lives, Mill calls upon us to aestheticize the broader context of human life. Like Robespierre, he was concerned about what our lives could mean to us if our death left nothing but memories and plant fertilizer. In particular, he thought that the project of making our lives artworks would be jeopardized without additional help from the imagination, namely, help in limiting the reach of the uninspiring scientific vision of human life.

To find Mill emphasizing a connection between theology and ethics, albeit somewhat indirect, may surprise those who read him as a great opponent of religion. Most of the sentences in “Theism”, for example, attack a number of the traditional defences for the existence of God, especially the arguments which have an apriori form (he has a special animus, given the evil he perceived in the world and his problems with philosophical optimism, for the view that God could be omnipotent and perfectly benevolent). Mill is only willing to allow a probabilistic argument for God’s existence, which rests on the rather traditional argument by design,

²⁴ Francois Furet, *Revolutionary France 1770-1880*; Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1988; p.147. For an interesting treatment of the same event, see Simon Schama, *Citizens*; Vintage Books, New York, 1990; p.835.

namely, that there are things in the natural world which can only be accounted for when thought of as made according to a purpose by an intelligent designer. This argument, he asserts, is “wholly grounded on experience” (CW, X.446), and can be shown to go beyond mere analogy to genuine induction.²⁵

The argument, though not enough for scientific truth, is sufficient to serve as the foundation for hope – the hope that the universe is benevolently governed and that there is an existence of some kind after physical death. We are justified in letting the imagination dwell on this hope, because it does not involve a deviation from “the rational principle of regulating our feelings as well as opinions strictly by evidence” (X.483), since there is no definitive evidence to be had one way or the other. In such a circumstance, i.e. where truth is not able to stake its claim, our hopes and beliefs should be guided by our “emotional needs, & the conditions favourable to [our] moral culture” (CW, XV.755; letter to Arthur W. Greene, 1861).

The hope in a providential universe and in life after death “makes life and human nature a far greater thing to the feelings, and gives greater strength as well as greater solemnity to all the sentiments which are awakened in us by our fellow-creatures and by mankind at large,” (X.485). The similarity of the spirit of this quote with what we found in the *Analysis*, where the ideas of beauty as embodied in an aesthetic object generate the “more imposing character” of the aesthetic feelings by

²⁵ Another version of Mill’s design argument can be found in an 1861 letter to Arthur W. Greene, CW, XV.755. Both accounts have the same structure: the eye is analyzed and shown to be organized for the sake of sight. “We may therefore conclude that there is some connexion through causation between the sight which is to follow & the cause which preceded & as we say, produced the eye. Induction can carry us no further than this. But the only mode supported by any of the analogies of experience, in which a fact to come can contribute to the production of the fact by which it is itself produced, is by the preconception of that fact & the purpose of producing it in the mind of an intelligent being.” One of the particularly interesting differences between the “Theism” version and this one is that, in the interim, Mill had come up to speed on Darwin, whose *The Origin of Species* had been recently published, and who offers us another ‘mode supported by an analogy of experience’. Mill expresses measured skepticism about the ability of the new theory to account for biologically complex features, like eyes, though he admits that the theory “is not so absurd as it looks, and that the analogies which have been discovered in experience, favourable to its possibility, far exceed what any one could have supposed beforehand” (p.449). He nonetheless suggests that, leaving Darwin’s theory to the judgment of history, “I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in Nature afford a large balance of probability in favour of creation by intelligence,” (p.450).

How Mill’s views on theology might have changed with the progress of evolutionary theory, a progress he would undoubtedly have approved of, is uncertain. He apparently thought, however, that the theory was “in no way whatever inconsistent with Creation,” though “it must be acknowledged that it would greatly attenuate the evidence for it,” (ibid.).

stimulating the imagination to a ‘higher world,’ is not accidental. Mill, I would argue, calls upon us here to infuse life with aesthetic value – an aesthetic value lacking in human life considered from a purely scientific perspective – by seeing our lives extending indefinitely as part of a watched-over universe. How is aesthetic value to be understood? Through the imagination: we aestheticize life by making it something greater to the imagination. That seems to mean phenomenologically, as we saw in Mill’s discussion distinguishing poetry from novels, that we dwell on the possibilities presented by life and that these possibilities impact us with greater emotive force, than, say, mere daydreaming or the imagination’s activity when we experience pleasures of agreeableness. We “may still conceive great ideas about [ourselves],” as Robespierre’s rhetoric puts it.

Life conceived of as extended infinitely forward in time overwhelms us by its grandeur and by its dreadfulness. The contrast of the aesthetic force of our physical life with that of immortality of some kind might be thought of as similar to the contrast between the aesthetic force of the sky at noon with that of Ruskin’s break of first light (which exemplifies the typical beauty of infinity). In both cases, the latter leads to more robust aesthetic imaginative activity than the former, namely, the kind of imaginative activity Mill found connected to Ruskin’s ideas of beauty and to our experience of beauty more generally. We need to make our lives beautiful, not only as represented in the drive to perfect our individual natures, but also in relation to the second level context in which that first level of beautifying takes place, i.e. that broader sense of the scope and meaning of our lives.

But what ethical benefits accrue from this aestheticizing? What exactly is desirable about encouraging these hopes for a providential universe and for our own immortality, thus making our lives a possible object for aesthetic contemplation, and potentially therefore, a “far greater thing to the feelings”? One of the most valuable dividends is that it “allays the sense of that irony of Nature which is so painfully felt when we see the exertions and sacrifices of a life culminating in the formation of a wise and noble mind, only to disappear from the world when the time has just arrived at which the world seems about to begin reaping the benefit of it,” (X.485). The hope of immortality “admits the possibility that the art employed in improving and beautifying the soul itself may avail for good in some other life, even when seemingly useless for this,” (ibid.).²⁶ So entertaining these hopes turns what might appear to be a useless project, beautifying the self, into a meaningful

²⁶ This leads me to think that an investigation comparing the place, nature, and import for ethical life of Kant’s postulates with what Mill has to say here about God and immortality, would be quite illuminating.

and potentially attractive one. If our eyes dwell only on the life we lead here in this world, the obvious attractions of the consideration that Mrs. Grundy dispenses could make the striving for perfection seem not only gray and sickly, but also a little foolish and laughable.

This is one of the places in Mill's corpus where the enforced peace between his perfectionism and his utilitarianism seems most at risk.²⁷ It becomes very difficult to reconcile his recognition that perfection of one's individual nature is a good with the view that all goods must be understood as part of or a means to happiness, since it seems clear that perfection may not lead to the happiness of others or of the individual who is striving to make her life beautiful. In part, Mill resorts to immortality and a providential universe to cover over this rift.²⁸

The second advantage to be had from entertaining these hopes comes in "the enlargement of the general scale of the feelings; the loftier aspirations being no longer in the same degree checked and kept down by a sense of the insignificance of human life – by the disastrous feeling of 'not worth while'" (ibid.). The "loftier aspirations" here are those tied to the first level of self-aestheticizing, and through a re-imagining of human life as more than merely physical, one opens up a much larger space in which one's artistic self-creation can operate. The hope of a life beyond this world and of a God to insure some type of moral purposiveness for the universe, helps to prevent existential crisis and to provide for a richer affective life. We

²⁷ In speaking about the absence of support for the view that God leaves evil in the world in order to stimulate human improvement, Mill suggests that: "If the Divine intention in making man was Effort towards Perfection, the divine purpose is as much frustrated as if its sole aim were human happiness. There is little of both, but the absence of both is the marked characteristic" (CW, XV.709; letter of Sept. 23rd 1860 to Florence Nightingale). It is interesting that he recognizes a clear separation here, even if he might also want to ultimately deny it's reality.

²⁸ A rift, by the way, that other perfectionists like von Humboldt openly recognize and accept. Perfection can simply not be seen as a part of happiness. The two ends are different, and at times not compatible. This is strikingly shown in the following enjoyable passage from *The Limits of State Action* (trans. by J.W. Burrow; Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1993): "[States] desire comfort, ease, tranquility; and these are most readily secured to the extent that there is no clash of individualities. But what man does and must have in view is something quite different – it is variety and activity. Only these develop the many-sided and vigorous character; and, there can be no one, surely, so far degraded as to prefer, for himself personally, comfort and enjoyment to greatness; and he who draws conclusions for such a preference in the case of others may justly be suspected of misunderstanding human nature, and of wishing to make men into machines," (p.18). For the rejection of utilitarianism by late 18th century German liberal perfectionists like Humboldt, see Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, & Romanticism*; Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA., 1992; p.20-1 and p.131ff.

are not tempted to collapse into a depression like that of Mill's youth, where nothing seems to have any importance, and where the exertions of life don't seem 'worth while'. Our feelings are able to resist the "dissolving force" of analysis through the vigorous activity of the imagination in regions where well-trained reason does not venture.

Thus we find that Mill's concern with aestheticizing human life in general, by making it an object more amenable to the typically aesthetic activity of the imagination, and therefore more amenable to supporting some of the most "imposing" feelings we have, expresses itself in an appeal to the hope, not the belief [for contrast between belief and hope look at Analysis I.418], that life continues beyond death in a providentially governed universe. This second level of aestheticization of the self helps to secure, as we have seen, the first level. The effort to sensitize oneself to the beauty or ugliness of one's existence, and to mould oneself in order to come closer to perfecting one's individual nature, gets support from the feeling that it seems 'worth while'. Making our lives beautiful and noble is time well spent, because we can feel, though reason does not allow us to know, that the effort may be appreciated and rewarded, even if it is not valued in the world of Mrs. Grundy's consideration which we currently inhabit.

III. Conclusion

Mill's aesthetic turn concerns the way we ought to go about perceiving our world, that is, those things we ought to notice or attend to in the world. On this ground rests our many evaluations of others and of ourselves. An emphasis on the aesthetic provokes us into contemplating how we perceive and whether or not our perception is blunted or ill-guided. Do we have perceptual vices (e.g. callousness, self-centeredness)? Are there possibilities for my life that I have simply been blind or deaf to, and which other manners of confronting the world could disclose for me?

Mill's concern with beauty cannot merely be read as a rhetorical ploy (i.e. as an exhortation to pursue the good, which uses an appeal to beauty as an instrument to move a reader), though it undoubtedly is that as well. This paper has shown that his aesthetic turn involves conceptual content. In particular, we saw how Mill conceived of aesthetic categories, and how he theorizes two ethically fundamental acts of treating the self from an aesthetic point-of-view. This aestheticizing amounts to taking on at least two different points-of-view vis-a-vis the self. In the first, we confront the self as an artist in the mode described in Mill's aesthetic theory. In the second, we confront the self, and human life more generally, through hope, as an

imager, not as a believer or as a scientist. In so doing, we are prompted to picture the self within a broader frame than that which reason and the evidence of the senses alone could provide, namely, the frame of immortality in a providential universe.

Essentially, Mill is advocating for a certain type of perceptual regime as essential to individual happiness “both in the comparatively humble sense of pleasure and freedom from pain, and in the higher meaning of rendering life, not what it now is almost universally, puerile and insignificant, but such as human beings with highly developed faculties can care to have” (*Logic*, VI.12.7). Institutions, beliefs, desires, friends, reason, advertising, evolution – all shape perception. One of the fundamental activities of development towards the good life is learning how one does and ought to notice the world without and within.

The full implications of this move to aesthetically-sensitive perception are many and can only be hinted at here. I will leave aside the political implications (i.e. those dealing with our understanding of the nature of civil society and of the state/citizen relationship), and mention only three others. First, this advocacy for aestheticizing the self brings out a potential usurpation of reason’s authority and prerogatives by the imagination. The protection of rationality and its role as adjudicator of moral dispute forms the backdrop of Bentham’s great suspicion of the arts and of imagination. Mill seems optimistic (or, to put it more negatively, a little naive) about the ease of balancing a strong role for the imagination in self-conceptualization with the priority of reason.

Secondly, Bentham and Mill are invested heavily in an Epicurean reduction of all goods to happiness, so that practical life can have a common standard of value. This common standard is necessary, according to their view, if moral disagreement is to be rationally, rather than arbitrarily, resolved. Now, the emphasis on beauty is, in part, an emphasis on perfection. As we have seen, however, and as many Germans knew well, it is not clear that perfection and happiness can be easily allied and united. It could be that one must choose between them. Mill’s appeal to the hope of immortality seems contrived as a method of avoiding that choice.

Lastly, if, as I would suggest, the standpoint of artist is central in a Millian ethics, we are left to consider how this effects his theory of selfhood. In particular, his strongly anti-rhetorical conception of art and of artist should prompt questions about how full and robust a notion of a non-performative, non-audience-directed self can exist within his philosophy.