

JOHN STUART MILL
AND THE ART OF LIFE

Edited by Ben Eggleston, Dale E. Miller, and David Weinstein

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Introduction

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1. The Art of Life

John Stuart Mill's contributions to ethics and political philosophy, such as his defenses of utilitarianism and liberalism, have long been influential and remain widely studied. Historically, less attention has been paid to the Art of Life, Mill's overarching framework for understanding the different areas of practical thought as parts of a larger enterprise within which specific theories' rationales and interrelations can be better understood. The reasons for this relative neglect of the Art of Life are not hard to find. Mill explicitly discusses it only briefly, and somewhat cryptically, three pages from the end of his daunting *A System of Logic*; moreover, it is relatively abstract and concerns matters on which most readers do not have prior intuitions of the kind that are readily engaged or challenged by the claims found in works such as *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*. But the Art of Life, in virtue of the organizing and authoritative role it plays in Mill's thought, is essentially Mill's theory of practical reason: his most general theory of what we have reason to do.¹ Clearly, then, it merits close study. This collection of essays is intended as a contribution to such study and as a stimulus to further work on this concept, its role in Mill's thought, and its usefulness for practical philosophy generally.

Mill lays the groundwork for introducing the Art of Life by distinguishing between science and art. Science, Mill writes, consists of claims asserting matters of fact. For example, the claim that steel has greater tensile

strength than string, or the claim that lowering interest rates tends to increase business investment, would belong to science. Claims belonging to art, in contrast, “do not assert that anything is, but enjoin or recommend that something should be.”² With this preliminary characterization of art in place, Mill mentions the need for “general premises, determining what are the proper objects of approbation, and what the proper order of precedence among those objects.”³ He then writes:

These general premises, together with the principal conclusions which may be deduced from them, form (or rather might form) a body of doctrine, which is properly the Art of Life, in its three departments, Morality, Prudence or Policy, and Æsthetics; the Right, the Expedient, and the Beautiful or Noble, in human conduct and works.⁴

Although Mill’s discussion of the Art of Life was not included in his *A System of Logic* until its third edition, which was published in 1851 (its eighth and final edition being published in 1872), the distinction between art and science was a matter of early and persisting interest for Mill and is explained quite deliberately not only in the last chapter of the *Logic* but also in Mill’s essay on the definition of political economy, which he wrote in 1831.⁵ An examination of these two sources reveals several differences and connections between art and science that partially determine the nature of the Art of Life.

First, as noted above, the propositions of art are prescriptive; those of science, descriptive. Claims of art are characteristically expressed in the imperative mood; those of science, in the indicative.⁶ Here, of course, Mill is retracing the familiar “is”/“ought” divide, declaring that the propositions of art “are a class by themselves” and that “A proposition of which the predicate is expressed by the words *ought* or *should be*, is generically different from one which is expressed by *is*, or *will be*.”⁷ Mill articulates this same distinction in several additional ways in his earlier essay.⁸ The Art of Life, clearly, is a prescriptive doctrine.

Second, every particular art has an axiological first principle affirming the desirability of a particular end, and it relies on the findings of a corresponding science to guide the formulation of its prescriptions for conduct that promotes or realizes that end. As Mill writes:

The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to the science. The science receives it, considers it as a phenomenon or effect to be studied, and having investigated its causes and conditions, sends it back to art with a theorem of the combinations of circumstances by which it could be produced. Art then examines these combinations of circumstances, and according as any of them are or are not in human power, pronounces the end attainable or not. The only one of the premises, therefore, which Art supplies, is the original major premise,

which asserts that the attainment of the given end is desirable. Science then lends to Art the proposition (obtained by a series of inductions or deductions) that the performance of certain actions will attain the end. From these premises Art concludes that the performance of these actions is desirable, and finding it also practicable, converts the theorem into a rule or precept.⁹

For example, the axiological major premise of the art of building is “that it is desirable to have buildings.”¹⁰ This art then uses propositions from (presumably) physics, engineering, economics, anatomy, kinesiology, psychology, and other sciences in order to formulate the rules of building.

Other arts that Mill mentions include architecture, hygiene, and medicine,¹¹ along with gunnery and mathematical land-surveying.¹² For such arts, ascertaining their respective axiological first principles is a fairly straightforward matter of interpretation rather than a matter of affirming a value judgment. For each such art, the end at which it aims can be identified by interpreting the actions understood to be guided by the art in question, and then its axiological first principle can be formulated as the proposition that that end is desirable. For example, interpreting the actions of people engaged in the art of building reveals that the axiological first principle of that art is that it is desirable to have buildings. The Art of Life’s axiological first principle, however, cannot be ascertained in this way, because the Art of Life, unlike the other arts, plays a regulatory role with respect to other arts: as indicated above, the Art of Life provides criteria for evaluating the ends of the ordinary arts and prioritizing them. Thus, to impute an axiological first principle to the Art of Life in the manner just sketched—by seeing what action in general aims at and formulating a premise asserting the desirability of that—would be to accord normative status to current practice too hastily. Even if one believes that ascertaining what is desirable is largely a matter of ascertaining what people desire, as Mill arguably does,¹³ identifying some principle as the axiological first principle of the Art of Life is ultimately an evaluative, not an interpretive, exercise.

Faced with the question of what principle should guide the Art of Life’s regulatory role, Mill gives an unsurprising answer. He writes, “the general principle to which all rules of practice [i.e., art] ought to conform, and the test by which they should be tried, is that of conduciveness to the happiness of mankind, or rather, of all sentient beings: in other words, . . . the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of Teleology.”¹⁴ The promotion of happiness, then, is the criterion by which the Art of Life can fulfill its two main purposes of certifying particular ordinary arts as worthy enterprises and dictating priority relations among the arts so certified. Building and medicine, for example, are worthy enterprises because they promote happiness. Indeed it seems that just about any art will pass this rather minimal test of acceptability, since just about any art could conceivably have a role to

play in the promotion of happiness. For example, even the art of causing pain could contribute to the promotion of happiness if practiced within the confines of a carefully administered penal system. Far more pressing, because necessary to resolve real controversy, is the Art of Life's second purpose, that of dictating when each particular art should be pursued. Indeed Mill writes that in the ordinary arts "there is seldom any visible necessity for justifying the end, since in general its desirability is denied by nobody, and it is only when the question of precedence is to be decided between that end and some other, that the general principles of Teleology have to be called in."¹⁵ When the general principles of teleology are called in, the promotion of the happiness of all sentient beings becomes the governing consideration, dictating whether it is building or medicine or the infliction of pain or another of the countless arts that an agent ought to engage in on a particular occasion.

The foregoing points about the Art of Life follow from focusing on its status as an art, and on the difference between art and science. This perspective yields essential, if limited, insight into the prescriptive character of the Art of Life and the regulatory role it plays. When we turn, however, to the internal structure of the Art of Life, Mill's account is even more cursory and raises several questions. Mill writes that the Art of Life has "three departments, Morality, Prudence or Policy, and *Æsthetics*; the Right, the Expedient, and the Beautiful or Noble, in human conduct and works."¹⁶ Though he soon glosses the third department as "Taste,"¹⁷ Mill does not further explain the contents of the different departments. And although he appears to return to this threefold distinction in the inaugural address he delivered at St. Andrews in 1867,¹⁸ little additional clarification can be found there. Nor is much help to be found elsewhere in Mill's works. There are several further places where Mill distinguishes among multiple evaluative perspectives, but while these distinctions are always trichotomous, the elements of the trios vary, and it is generally not entirely clear whether or how they can be mapped onto the departments of the Art of Life (or one another). We will say more about Mill's belief that actions should be evaluated from several distinct standpoints below.

Mill's extensive discussions of morality in his other writings obviate the need for scholars to conjecture too speculatively about his conception of the first department of the Art of Life (and, as discussed below, Mill uses the notion of the Art of Life to advance some important claims about morality). In regard to the second department—to which Mill refers with the terms "Prudence," "Policy," and "the Expedient"—Alan Ryan's prominent account focuses on the term "prudence" and claims that this refers to the self-interest of the agent.¹⁹ For example, "the avoidance of drunkenness, not frequenting prostitutes, not gambling, etc., are prudent."²⁰

It may be the case that those actions are prudent and that prudence is concerned with the agent's self-interest,²¹ but of course there is more to the second department than prudence. "Policy" is such a vague term that it may not indicate the content of the second department with any precision, but "expediency" is a term that Mill obviously does not equate with an agent's self-interest. In *Utilitarianism*, he states that it is only in the "popular" sense of the term—in fact, only in the lowest of its popular senses—that "the Expedient" means "that which is expedient for the particular interest of the agent himself."²² Along these lines, Roger Crisp persuasively suggests that the point of view of the second department involves people judging alternative options "according to whether they approve of them generally, in a way that is not strictly moral, that is, in Mill's sense, not concerned with duty."²³ This claim is a useful corrective to the narrowness of Ryan's understanding, and could form the kernel of a more satisfactory comprehensive account of the second department of the Art of Life.

The third department is at least as difficult to characterize as the second, partly because Mill seems to reach the conclusion that the Art of Life requires a department of aesthetics comparatively late.²⁴ In the first two editions of the *Logic*, in which he refers to "the art corresponding to the sciences of human nature and society"²⁵ but not the Art of Life per se, the third department is "the art of education."²⁶ But in the third and subsequent editions of the *Logic*, Mill formally discusses the Art of Life and indicates that its third department is aesthetics.²⁷ Some indication of Mill's understanding of the aesthetic perspective is provided in his essay "Bentham," in which he writes that the aesthetic aspect of an action addresses itself "to our imagination" and that from the aesthetic perspective "we admire or despise."²⁸ To illustrate these brief and abstract remarks, he gives the following example of an aesthetic evaluation of the telling of a lie:

it is . . . *mean*, because it is cowardly—because it proceeds from not daring to face the consequences of telling the truth—or at best is evidence of want of that *power* to compass our ends by straightforward means, which is conceived as properly belonging to every person not deficient in energy or in understanding.²⁹

Among scholarly interpretations, Ryan's is, again, prominent. Citing this passage from "Bentham,"³⁰ he writes that "it is a matter for sensation rather than ratiocination"³¹ and that "it is not a matter of calculation, but of trying to visualize life in a certain way."³²

Despite the textual support in "Bentham" for emphasizing the role of the imagination in the third department, it is far from established that Mill also has in mind the complete exclusion of ratiocination and calculation—either of which (broadly understood) could presumably enter at a higher

level into a reasonable person's determination of what character traits are worth admiring or despising. For example, Mill asserts in the *Logic* that while "the cultivation of an ideal nobleness of will and conduct, should be to individual human beings an end, to which the specific pursuit either of their own happiness or of that of others (except so far as included in that idea) should, in any case of conflict, give way," nevertheless "the very question, what constitutes this elevation of character, is itself to be decided by reference to happiness as the standard."³³ Of course, if ratiocination and calculation are readmitted to the modes of thought involved in the third department, then it becomes far less circumscribed; perhaps the best summary assessment is Ryan's own: "Its rules are elusive."³⁴

Not only are the contents of two of the three departments inadequately defined; it is also unclear why the Art of Life should have "departments" other than the specific ordinary arts such as those discussed earlier. One obvious potential explanation begins with the thought that every ordinary art can be placed in exactly one of the three departments, meaning that they would form mutually exclusive and exhaustive subdivisions of arts. But it seems that any given art may, at times, be viewed from the perspective of any of the three departments. For example, an architect must obey moral constraints on the practice of architecture, presumably needs to be mindful of practicing it prudently or expediently, and may even be able to practice it nobly or beautifully.

Despite the foregoing unanswered questions about the internal logic of the Art of Life, some of the implications Mill intends for this notion to have can be discerned, particularly if one begins by noting the context in which Mill introduces this notion. Book VI of the *Logic* is called *On the Logic of the Moral Sciences*;³⁵ it is Mill's attempt to explain the epistemological principles that should govern scientific reasoning concerning persons and their interactions with one another. Most of the book is concerned with free will, the laws of mental activity and character development, and the possibility of scientific laws that adequately capture social phenomena such as the changes in societies over time that are chronicled and analyzed by historians. So far, Mill is concerned exclusively with science and does not have any need for the distinction between science and art. But in the last chapter of *On the Logic of the Moral Sciences*, which is the last chapter of *A System of Logic* as a whole, Mill notes that the term "moral knowledge" is often taken to refer to "the knowledge of duties; practical ethics, or morality."³⁶ It is this observation that leads Mill to distinguish between science and art and to introduce the notion of the Art of Life in the way described above. Given that Mill introduces the Art of Life in a discussion about morality, and about how moral thought (belonging to art) is different from the moral sciences

properly so called, it is natural to surmise that Mill intends for his discussion of the Art of Life to have implications for sound thinking about morality.

There are, in fact, two significant claims about morality that Mill uses his discussion of the Art of Life to advance. The first is that fruitful speculation about morality must attend to the value of the various possible ends that the art of morality might be thought to serve. Mill's motivation for making this point is his observation that people who engage in the moral sciences, properly so called, "invariably" also make judgments belonging to the art of morality: "they always undertake to say, not merely what is, but what ought to be." Yet, Mill writes, "To entitle them to do this, a complete doctrine of Teleology is indispensable."³⁷ Such a doctrine, of course, is typically ignored by the moralists Mill criticizes but is provided by the Art of Life.

Mill observes that in the respect just mentioned—in requiring careful attention to its ultimate end, as a prerequisite for its sound development—morality, along with politics, is an atypical art. As indicated above, Mill writes that in the ordinary arts "there is seldom any visible necessity for justifying the end, since in general its desirability is denied by nobody, and it is only when the question of precedence is to be decided between that end and some other, that the general principles of Teleology have to be called in."³⁸ But, he immediately adds, "a writer on Morals and Politics requires those principles at every step."³⁹ Given Mill's view that moral (and political) speculation is liable to be pursued to "no avail"⁴⁰ if this precondition is ignored, it is easy to appreciate Mill's interest in showing how the Art of Life can enable this precondition to be met.

In making this point about morality—that it cannot be fruitfully contemplated in the absence of sound principles of teleology—Mill is, at least in the 1851 edition of the *Logic* (the one in which Mill's discussion of Art of Life first appears), concerned to claim that Comte's neglect of this point renders his moral pronouncements practically valueless. After complimenting Comte's work as a historian, Mill complains that he "seems to think that a theory of the natural history of society is the whole of social philosophy, practical as well as theoretical, and that any attempt at an accurate definition or philosophical estimation of Ends is a needless, if not mischievous, subtlety."⁴¹ Mill goes on to criticize Comte for venturing beyond science's confines of statements of cause and effect and declaring "decisions freely respecting right and wrong, every one of which necessarily involves some teleological principle."⁴² The moral judgments Comte reaches, Mill writes, are just a product of tradition and personal feeling, since Comte does not proceed from "any general teleological standard by which to try all subordinate ends."⁴³

The second significant claim about morality that Mill uses his discussion of the Art of Life to advance is that morality is not a supreme or all-encompassing art; rather, its rightful place is alongside other evaluative perspectives—that of prudence or expediency and that of aesthetics. Whereas the previous point (about the necessity of attending to teleological principles grounding morality) follows from the regulatory role to be played by the Art of Life, the present point follows from the internal structure of the Art of Life—in particular, from morality's status of being just one of the three departments of the Art of Life. Nevertheless, the present point can be further appreciated in light of the considerations underlying the Art of Life's regulatory role, since undoubtedly Mill's reason for insisting on a sharply delimited domain for morality is based on the promotion of happiness. Individuals' self-development and their beneficial relations with others are hampered, not optimized, when morality becomes so preoccupying that it crowds out other important evaluative perspectives and criteria.

Mill's concern with keeping morality in its place is one that finds expression in other writings published both before and after the first appearance of his remarks on the Art of Life. For example, in "Bentham," Mill claims that "almost all professed moralists" make the mistake of "treating the *moral* view of actions and characters . . . as if it were the sole one: whereas it is only one of three, by all of which our sentiments towards the human being may be, and ought to be . . . materially influenced."⁴⁴ Mill continues this theme of keeping morality in its place in material that appears in every edition of the *Logic* (the first of which was published in 1843), not just the editions in which he discusses the Art of Life by name. Near the beginning of the last chapter of the *Logic*, he writes that "ethics, or morality, is properly a *portion* of the art corresponding to the sciences of human nature and society."⁴⁵ An additional, later, context in which this theme arises is Mill's 1865 essay *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, in which Mill vigorously criticizes Comte for having an overly expansive conception of the domain of morality. "M. Comte is a morality-intoxicated man," Mill writes, adding, "Every question with him is one of morality."⁴⁶

While Mill acknowledges the existence of evaluative perspectives other than that of morality, he does seem to regard the moral perspective as in some sense preeminent. For example, while he criticizes Bentham for writing and feeling that the moral perspective "ought to be the sole master of all our actions,"⁴⁷ he concedes that this perspective "is unquestionably the first and most important mode of looking at" actions⁴⁸ and should be "paramount."⁴⁹ Similarly, while Mill admits in *Utilitarianism* that those utilitarians who "have cultivated their moral feelings, but not their sympathies nor their artistic perceptions" have fallen into error, he still feels able to say in their defense that "if there is to be any error, it is better that it

should be on that side.”⁵⁰ And the mistake with which Mill charges Comte is not that of failing to regard morality as inferior to some other evaluative perspective or perspectives, but only that of overlooking the fact that actions can be meritorious without being obligatory.⁵¹ Of course, even if Mill believes that on the whole the perspective of morality is paramount over the others (whatever precisely those others may be), we are still left with the question of what an agent has the most reason to do, all things considered, when the action seen as best from the moral perspective is not seen as best from some or all of the other evaluative perspectives.⁵²

Thus, the two main claims that Mill uses his discussion of the Art of Life to advance are that fruitful thought about morality must be based on principles of teleology and that morality must not be construed excessively broadly. Mill’s discussion of the Art of Life has further implications for Mill scholars engaged in the interpretation of *Utilitarianism*. First, Mill’s discussion of the Art of Life effectively clarifies some passages in that essay that might otherwise remain murky. For example, after concluding that happiness is the end of human action, Mill writes, “This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality.”⁵³ The way in which only some human action is a matter of morality is, of course, much clearer in the light of the Art of Life. Similarly, familiarity with the Art of Life usefully contextualizes the latter part of Mill’s remark that “happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from which it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole.”⁵⁴ Finally, the Art of Life gives fuller meaning to Mill’s remark, in *Utilitarianism*, about how morality is “mark[ed] off . . . from the remaining provinces of Expediency and Worthiness.”⁵⁵ These references to the ideas of the Art of Life validate Ryan’s claim that “the account of the matter given in *Utilitarianism* presupposes, and indeed only makes complete sense in the light of, the account in the *System of Logic*.”⁵⁶

Utilitarianism not only repeatedly refers to the ideas of the Art of Life; it also contains passages that are properly regarded more as pertaining to that doctrine than as internal to Mill’s moral theory. Perhaps the most important such passage is the following sentence, which may be quoted more often than any other sentence in the essay:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.⁵⁷

It is natural, upon reading this sentence, to think that the foundation of morals to which Mill refers is itself a part of morality (a foundational part,

but still a part), rather than a source of foundational guidance coming from outside of morality. With Mill's discussion of the Art of Life in mind, however, it becomes apparent that these thoughts, however natural, are incorrect. As D. G. Brown compellingly argues, the foundation to which Mill refers, the principle of utility, is best understood to be the claim that happiness is the only thing desirable as an end.⁵⁸ So understood, "the foundation of morals," for Mill, also serves as the foundation of the other departments of the Art of Life and is not itself a strictly moral principle.⁵⁹ As Fred Wilson writes, "to call the end that defines the Art of Life a moral end, is to claim too little for it."⁶⁰

One obvious consequence of this understanding of the principle of utility is that Mill's defense of it, in *Utilitarianism*, is thereby a defense of the Art of Life's key principle that "the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of Teleology."⁶¹ Indeed in the 1865 edition of the *Logic*—the first to appear after the publication of *Utilitarianism* in 1861—Mill appends a footnote to this principle in which he says that *Utilitarianism* contains "an express discussion and vindication of this principle."⁶² Mill's discussion of the principle of utility, then, illustrates that while *Utilitarianism* may contain Mill's most definitive expression of his views on morality, it also contains important parts of his views on the broader and more foundational topic of the Art of Life.

To be sure, the implications of the Art of Life for Mill's moral views, and for Mill's practical philosophy more generally, remain to be fully worked out.⁶³ As summarized below, the papers in this volume not only more deeply develop the themes considered above but also creatively explore the relevance of the Art of Life to further aspects of Mill's thought.

2. Overview of the Volume

The chapters in section I of this volume are concerned with the relation between the Art of Life's departments of prudence or expediency and morality. A common thread that runs through all four chapters is the belief that Mill subscribes to some version or other of rule utilitarianism, or at least that his theory anticipates what we today call rule utilitarianism in certain respects. The first chapter in the section, by Rex Martin, is an attempt to get clear about the precise nature of Mill's moral theory. Martin distinguishes between "ideal rules" and "indirect" versions of rule utilitarianism. He concludes that Mill's theory incorporates elements of both, albeit more of the latter. The following three chapters all address the so-called incoherence or rule-worship objection to rule utilitarianism as it relates to Mill. David Weinstein contends that it is anachronistic to apply the contem-

porary label “rule utilitarian” to Mill. Nonetheless, he maintains that there is little in contemporary presentations of the incoherence objection that cannot be found in F. H. Bradley’s critique of Mill’s moral theory for its lack of earnestness with respect to moral rules. Ben Eggleston claims that in the realm of instrumental reason Mill anticipates and endorses an objection to rule-based views analogous to the incoherence objection. He considers a variety of ways in which the tension between this and Mill’s adherence to rule utilitarianism might be resolved. Dale E. Miller characterizes the incoherence objection in terms of an inconsistency between a rule-utilitarian theory and the argument for it and maintains that the argument that is most plausibly attributed to Mill is inconsistent with his version of rule utilitarianism. Miller describes an alternative argument for rule utilitarianism whose premises can all be located in Mill’s thought, but he maintains that although there is no inconsistency between this argument and the version of rule utilitarianism to which it lends support, this version of the theory is an “individual rule utilitarianism” quite unlike Mill’s.

The two chapters in section II, from Jonathan Riley and Wendy Donner, address the relation between the Art of Life’s departments of morality and aesthetics. Riley asks how we should understand the notion of supererogation in the context of Mill’s moral theory. His answer is that, for Mill, the higher pleasure associated with the moral sentiments is qualitatively superior to any competing kinds of pleasures, with the upshot that a social code that distributes equal rights and correlative duties has priority over competing considerations within his utilitarianism. Yet an aesthetic kind of utility, associated with the sentiment of beauty or sublimity, may still be qualitatively supreme because it does not conflict with the moral sentiments. This highest kind of utility attaches to praiseworthy supererogatory conduct, where an agent chooses to waive her rights in order to promote the happiness of others in ways beyond the call of duty. In her wide-ranging contribution, Donner considers a number of questions raised by Mill’s characterization of the department of aesthetics. She begins with that of whether the activities of moral reformers such as Mill himself are governed by the department of aesthetics rather than that of morality. She then goes on to offer an account of Millian “aesthetic education” and to contrast Mill’s conception of the human relation to nature with those offered by Wordsworth, Buddhism, and deep ecology.

Section III is concerned with the axiological first principle of the Art of the Life, the principle of utility. Both of the chapters found here suggest that there is something problematic about Mill’s assertion that this one principle is the foundation of his doctrine of ends. Elijah Millgram argues that Mill’s claim that the Art of Life must have a single axiological principle is at odds with Mill’s own life, for it was the fact that the young Mill had one

aim lexically prior to all others that led to his famous “mental crisis.” Millgram claims that according to Mill’s own psychological theory a life with a single lexical priority will be both unsatisfying and morally unfree. Drawing on Mill’s writing on education, Philip Kitcher depicts Mill not as a doctrinaire utilitarian but rather as a “flexible consequentialist,” one who is committed to appraising proposed ethical rules in terms of their consequences but who does not believe that this means recommending those that would maximize aggregate happiness. Indeed, according to Kitcher, Mill does not have a timeless conception of the good at all but rather believes that we must engage in an ongoing Deweyan project of reconstruction in axiology.

Finally, section IV comprises chapters that comment in different ways upon what it means to put the Art of Life into practice. Robert H. Haraldsson contends that by the time Mill wrote *On Liberty* he had come to embrace a view of moral reasoning, the “Art of Ethics,” that appears to be in some tension with the Art of Life itself. The structure of the Art of Life suggests that we ought to be able to reason deductively about what to do, but, according to Haraldsson, Mill’s mature view is that when ethics is done in a deductive spirit the likely result is that people will give only dull and torpid assent to ethical doctrines and creeds. Nadia Urbinati explores the ways in which Mill’s understanding of the good life—the life of a person who is successfully executing the Art of Life—is informed by ancient thought. On her reading, ancient and modern conceptions of the good life form the thesis and antithesis out of which Mill aims to synthesize a conception superior to either and one to which the members of modern societies can realistically aspire. Finally, Colin Heydt investigates what it means for us to put the Art of Life into practice by focusing on the department of aesthetics and following out the implications of Mill’s suggestion that we should regard our own lives as works of art. He finds that Mill is encouraging us to “redescribe” our lives, seeing ourselves not in the mechanistic terms encouraged by modern industrial forces but rather as members of a “Grand Etre” engaged in an epic struggle for good against the forces of evil.

3. Conclusion

Taking account of the Art of Life helps clarify how Mill understood utilitarianism and how he saw himself as advancing the view beyond Bentham’s efforts. In particular, it helps us come to terms with ambiguities in Mill’s thinking such as the status of the higher pleasures as constitutive of living a good life. The Art of Life also introduces new puzzles about Mill’s thinking such as the precise function of the principle of utility as an axiological principle. But however the Art of Life clarifies or complicates interpreting Mill,

ignoring its import for his thought dooms us to misunderstanding him in his own terms. Perhaps the enterprise of interpreting Mill or any other historical philosopher is not an end in itself but rather only a means of discovering ideas and arguments that we can appropriate for our own purposes. Nevertheless, there are some figures whom we should especially want to interpret accurately, to “get right,” because they possessed such ability that correctly reading them will more likely lead to our discovering material of the greatest advantage to our own philosophizing. The most accurate reading of their work will more probably stimulate imaginative thinking on our part. And Mill, surely, belongs to this class of thinkers.

NOTES

1. Mill himself describes the Art of Life as essentially “principles of Practical Reason” (Mill, *System of Logic*, 950).
2. Ibid., 949.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Mill, “Definition of Political Economy.” See the introductory note on p. 309 for information about Mill’s writing of this essay in 1831 and the publication of it in 1836.
6. Mill, *System of Logic*, 943.
7. Ibid., 949.
8. Mill, “Definition of Political Economy,” 312.
9. Mill, *System of Logic*, 944–45.
10. Ibid., 949.
11. Ibid.
12. Mill, “Definition of Political Economy,” 313.
13. In a much-debated passage in *Utilitarianism*, Mill writes that “the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it” (234).
14. Mill, *System of Logic*, 951.
15. Ibid., 950.
16. Ibid., 949 (quoted above).
17. Ibid., 951.
18. Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 251.
19. Ryan, “Mr. McCloskey on Mill’s Liberalism,” 259; “John Stuart Mill’s Art of Living,” 620–21; and *John Stuart Mill*, 216.
20. Ryan, “Mr. McCloskey on Mill’s Liberalism,” 259. Another key point, for Ryan, is that “prudential rules are hypothetical, not categorical, imperatives” (“Mr. McCloskey on Mill’s Liberalism,” 259; see also *John Stuart Mill*, p. 215).
21. Indeed, Mill contrasts prudence with concern for others’ interests in *Utilitarianism* (p. 246).
22. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 223.
23. Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism*, 121.
24. D. G. Brown writes that “The third department, indeed, seems unstable in Mill’s account” (“Mill on Liberty and Morality,” 154).
25. Mill, *System of Logic*, 943.

26. Ibid., 943, note c.
27. Ibid., 949.
28. Mill, "Bentham," 112.
29. Ibid.
30. Ryan, "Mr. McCloskey on Mill's Liberalism," 259 n. 35; and *John Stuart Mill*, 216 n. 8.
31. Ryan, "Mr. McCloskey on Mill's Liberalism," 259.
32. Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 216.
33. Mill, *System of Logic*, 952.
34. Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 216.
35. Mill, *System of Logic*, 831.
36. Ibid., 943.
37. Ibid., 950.
38. Ibid., quoted above.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 950, note c.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid. In subsequent editions of the *Logic* (the first of which appeared in 1856), these criticisms of Comte do not appear. But there are reasons for thinking that the deletions were not prompted by a change of mind, on Mill's part, about the necessity of grounding moral (and political) speculation on sound teleological principles. First, throughout subsequent editions, the spirit of the passage remains, as do claims not mentioning Comte by name such as the claim that "a writer on Morals and Politics requires those principles at every step" (Mill, *System of Logic*, 950, quoted above). Second, in the early 1850s, Mill thought about writing more on Comte seriously, and on multiple occasions, and seems to have oscillated between wanting to write nothing and wanting to write a great deal (Robson, "Textual Introduction," cxxx–cxxxi.). Of course, the latter desire eventually won out, with *Auguste Comte and Positivism* emerging as the result, but at the time either desire could have motivated the deletion of the sentences on Comte from the *Logic*. In any event, the material that remains is quite emphatic on the point at issue: morality, unlike most other arts, must be overtly and directly grounded in teleological principles such as those provided by the Art of Life.
44. Mill, "Bentham," 112. Unfortunately for our understanding of the Art of Life, the three perspectives that Mill goes on to mention do not neatly correspond with the three departments mentioned above; instead, Mill writes that "Every human action has three aspects: its *moral* aspect, or that of its *right* and *wrong*; its *aesthetic* aspect, or that of its *beauty*; its *sympathetic* aspect, or that of its *loveableness*" ("Bentham," 112).
45. Mill, *System of Logic*, 943, emphasis added; partially quoted above.
46. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 336. Mill's insistence on the limited domain of the *art* of morality contrasts noticeably, and perhaps confusingly for some, with his very expansive use of the adjective "moral" to refer to the whole range of the *sciences* concerning persons and their interactions with one another, as mentioned above. On this point see Fuchs, "Mill's Theory of Morally Correct Action," 155.
47. Mill, "Bentham," 113.
48. Ibid., 112.
49. Ibid., 113.
50. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 221.

51. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 337–41.
52. Among scholars, perhaps the most commonly held opinion concerning how conflicts between considerations from different departments are to be resolved is that the governing idea of the Art of Life must be invoked: in any given situation, whatever option will lead to the greatest happiness is the one that ought to be chosen. See, for example, Gray ("Introduction," xxvi) and Crisp (*Mill on Utilitarianism*, 123).
53. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 214.
54. *Ibid.*, 237.
55. *Ibid.*, 247.
56. Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 193.
57. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 210.
58. Brown, "What Is Mill's Principle of Utility?" 5.
59. For further discussion of this point, see Dryer ("Mill's Utilitarianism," civ), Ryan (*John Stuart Mill*, 192), Brown ("Mill on Liberty and Morality," 153 and 157; and "What Is Mill's Principle of Utility?" especially 2–3), and Gray ("Introduction," x).
60. Wilson, "Mill's 'Proof' of Utility and the Composition of Causes," 137.
61. Mill, *System of Logic*, 951, quoted above.
62. *Ibid.*, 951, note *.
63. For further efforts along these lines, see Ryan ("Mr. McCloskey on Mill's Liberalism," 258; and *John Stuart Mill*, 233), Baker ("*Utilitarianism* and 'Secondary Principles,'" 69–71), Gaus ("Mill's Theory of Moral Rules," 269–72 and 277–78), Hoag ("Mill's Conception of Happiness as an Inclusive End," 420–21), and Gray ("Introduction," viii and xxv).

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