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Individual Creative Assignment

John Stuart Mill

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Throughout this semester there have been many philosophers that I have enjoyed learning about, however John Stuart Mill seemed to catch my attention more than others. John Stuart Mill started his education early in life and later became the most educated man in the world. Johns father James Mill was a philosophy professor and was friends with Jeremy Bentham, a fellow philosopher, they believed that all minds were essentially the same at birth and that if instruction and education started early enough that it would yield a healthy and rational child. The best way to test this idea was on John Stuart Mill. John didn’t have a normal childhood; he had a very strict schedule for learning and didn’t have time for much else. When he was three he started learning Greek and arithmetic. The strenuous learning only became more so with age. John Stuart Mill was forced to learn everything for himself before his father would teach him. By the time John Stuart Mill was 25 years old he was considered the most educated man in the world, which I find very fascinating. John Stuart Mill said this about his education “Most boys or youths who have had much knowledge drilled into them have their mental capacities not strengthened, but overlaid by it. They are crammed with mere facts, with the opinions and phrases of other people, and these are accepted as a substitute for the power to form opinions of their own; and thus the sons of eminent fathers, who have spared no pains in their education, so often grow up mere parroters of what they have learnt, incapable of using their minds except in the furrows of traced for them. Mine… was not an education of cram. My father never permitted anything that I had learnt to degenerate into a mere exercise of memory. He strove to make the understanding not only go along with every step of teaching, but, if possible, precede it. Anything which could be found out by think, I never was told, until I had exhausted my efforts to find it out for myself” This strict upbringing later came back to haunt John as he fell into a deep depression.

John went into a depression when he was in his 20’s, which he attributed this depression to the way that he was raised. In one of his quotes during this depression he said; “I sought relief from my favorite books, those memorials of past nobleness and greatness from which I had always hitherto drawn strength and animation. I read them now without feeling, or with the accustomed feeling minus all its charm and I became persuaded that my love of mankind, and of excellence for its own sake, had worn itself out.” When John was 24 he fell in love with a woman named Harriet Taylor. Their relationship started as they discussed Johns writings but later developed into something more. John credited Harriet with his connection to a human element and a balance to his life and in many instances said that she influenced his work for the better.

John Stuart Mill is best known for his philosophical ideas regarding Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is believed to be doing the most good for the most amounts of people. Although John was raised this way he added quality into utilitarianism and “refuted the orthodoxy he had been raised to defend.” John didn’t agree with all pleasures being leveled. He argued about higher (refined) and lower (cruder) pleasures. When speaking about refined pleasures John said “Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast’s pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs.” Another quote that John said was; “Though we may jokingly claim that ignorance is bliss, few of us would consciously choose bliss if the price is ignorance.” Thinking about it like this, John Stuart Mill was absolutely right. Its interesting because John goes on to say that men will often choose the “nearer good” which to me sounds like what we refer today as instant gratification. This is a concept that we hear so much about because our society is focused on what things bring them pleasure right now even though the reward or pleasure wont be as good as the “higher pleasure”. These ideas remind me of a psychologist named Abraham Maslow. He is best known for the model named Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. I wonder if Maslow was familiar with John Stuart Mill and his idea of higher and lower pleasures. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs refers to stages of needs that are often depicted as a pyramid. It basically states that before moving to higher stages we need to first satisfy the lower needs. While this does have its differences I think that they are similar. John also talked about social pressures that hinder us from focusing on “higher sentiments”. This is why I brought up Maslow’s hierarchy of needs because there are social pressures that stop us from moving to the next stage of the pyramid. When the lower levels of needs have been satisfied then we have what is called self-actualization. Self-actualization according to Maslow, represents growth of an individual toward fulfillment of the highest needs; those for meaning in life. Which to me sounds like what John Stuart Mill had in mind while establishing the idea of higher and lower pleasures.

John Stuart Mill was also a firm believer in “Altruism” and that an individual’s needs are no more or less important than another individual’s needs. I think that he said it perfectly when he said “I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.” I like those two words benevolent (well meaning and kindly) and disinterested (not influenced by considerations of personal advantage). I think that it is a great insight for everyone. Not only did John want to modify behavior but also he wanted to reform character. John used the phrase mere contentment. John’s major goal for utilitarianism was to “make as many people as happy as possible, not as content as possible.” He really did have a desire for everyone to progress and he believed that with “good physical and moral education” poverty could be completely extinguished. “As for the vicissitudes of fortune, and other disappointments connected with worldly circumstances, these are principally the effect of either gross imprudence, of ill-regulated desires, or of gad or imperfect social institutions. All of these grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort; and though their removal is grievously slow – though a long succession of generations will perish in the breach before the conquest is completed, and this world becomes all that, if will and knowledge were not wanting, it might easily be made – yet every mind sufficiently intelligent and generous to bear a part, however small and inconspicuous, in the endeavor will draw a noble enjoyment from the contest itself, which he would not for any bribe in the from of selfish and indulgence consent to be without.” There is no doubt about it that John Stuart Mill was a very gifted man. Much of his philosophy was discussed above I would still like to cover some of this Epistemology. Epistemology is the theory of deep knowledge and again, no doubt about it; John Stuart Mill had a very vast knowledge. He did share some common ground with philosophers before him, like David Hume, another well know philosopher. They both shared the epistemology of empiricism. Empiricism is knowledge built on sensual perceptions, very hands on approach. John was for this reason a skeptic. He believed that abstract ideas should be checked by empirical facts. He also taught that philosophy and art should emulate science. He also believed that science is the highest form of human knowledge and that we must obtain a good education. Not for the sake of having an education but to create a blueprint for social reform. While much of his epistemology I like, I am not fond of empiricism; I do believe that things can be true without sensual data. One example is mental illness. It is very difficult to understand and just because we can’t feel it doesn’t mean that it isn’t an illness.

I now have a greater appreciation for John Stuart Mill after reading about his life and his philosophies. I really like how he was an advocate for bettering everyone’s lives. As I read about John Stuart Mill I found this quote “The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good, in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.” I like how he encouraged education and understanding. It is something that I find very important as well. I also like the idea of utilitarianism more and more and I studied for this paper and as I continue to study.

Bibliography

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