

# Desire, Pleasure, and Education: The Perfection of the Teacher through the Pursuit of Happiness

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Happiness and Education*, Nel Noddings argues that happiness and education are intrinsically related, even though many people view them as being in opposition to one another (Noddings, 2003, p. 1). She states the intimate connection of the two: 'Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness' (*ibid.*). After discussing different views of happiness and elaborating on the concept of happiness as an aim of education, Noddings concludes that the best schools should resemble the best homes, in the sense that the best homes—and schools—are happy places (p. 261). Interestingly, following this conclusion, she says, 'Clearly, if children are to be happy in schools, their teachers should also be happy'. This is because if '[t]he adults in these happy places', namely the teachers in a school in the case of academics, recognize that 'one aim of education (and of life itself) is happiness', then children 'will seize their educational opportunities with delight, affected by adults' understanding of what happiness is'. She adds, 'too often we forget this obvious connection' (*ibid.*). Why does this happen?

A possible response to this is that school is not a place for teachers to pursue their happiness, but for students to pursue theirs. Similarly, one may say that teachers are hired to enhance students' happiness, not their own. These ideas may explain the reason for our forgetfulness of the 'obvious connection', from the viewpoint of the people's conception of who teachers are. This way of thinking, however, simultaneously implies people's understanding of happiness: they treat the issue of happiness as a priority, such that children's happiness should come first in school, and all other considerations second. Is this really the way in which happiness is pursued? Does cherishing one's happiness mean suppressing the others'? Could the pursuit of happiness be reduced to the issue of who deserves the biggest piece of a pie in a given situation? This paper tries to respond to Noddings' implication on the intimate but frequently forgotten connection between students' and teachers' happiness in school from a standpoint of what happiness is, in the hopes of contributing to the idea of who teachers are.

## J. S. MILL'S UTILITARIANISM AND HAPPINESS IN CLASSROOMS

In order to elucidate the connection between—or prioritization of—students' and teachers' happiness in school, let us focus on the utilitarian notion of happiness. In discussing 'happy classrooms', Noddings says that we have made some progress

towards reducing pain in schools. For example, teachers have become more sensitive to sarcasm and humiliating remarks directed at students, though, regrettably, they still occur (p. 245). The reason Noddings relates establishing happy classrooms to the decrease in pain is that she 'agreed with J. S. Mill that the absence of pain contributes to happiness or, at least, that pain makes us unhappy' (*ibid.*). One of the most frequently quoted passages, either by his proponents or critics, from Mill—the representative Utilitarian<sup>1</sup>—goes:

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 and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure (Mill, 1991, p. 137).

It is clear that this is a powerful conception in grasping the nature of happiness, although there are examples of criticisms that are also convincing. Instead of examining the debate between utilitarianism and its critics (who are mostly deontologists), however, this study reverts back to its initial question: does Millian understanding serve or counter the division between students' and teacher's happiness? It appears that either conclusion can be drawn at this point. On one hand, utilitarianism helps to bridge the division because it clearly advocates the promotion of happiness no matter to whose it is. On the other hand, it reinforces the division because if criteria for happiness are designated as measurements of pleasure and pain, the feeling of happiness becomes something solely subjective. Thus, both sides cannot share their happiness with each other.

Mill does not, however, simply define utilitarian good as the expansion of subjective pleasure. In another notable passage, he says: 'That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent to harm to others' (p. 14). This quotation illustrates the limit in increasing pleasure. One's pursuit for happiness cannot be considered good when it harms others, or in other words, causes pain and unhappiness. Thus, we return to the familiar dilemma. Teachers' pursuit of happiness is permitted, as long as it does not affect students negatively. Logically, it is possible to say that students' happiness is allowed to be maximized as far as it does not aggravate their teachers, but this is obviously not the case in most classrooms. The reason is a familiar one: we have to make a choice between teachers' or students' happiness if the two are in conflict with each other, and students' happiness must come first. We then hear the familiar explanation for why it must be so: i. e., teachers are employed as mature adults to take responsibility for enhancing immature students' possibility for happiness. There is nothing wrong with this understanding as one way of explaining the teacher's role in school, but here is another question: Does Mill really say that the people's pursuit of happiness involves expanding one's pleasure, under the limitation of inflicting pain on others? If it does, utilitarianism appears to be a mere system of adjustment and distribution of benefits and deficits.

There may be a viewpoint that resolves this conflict between students' pleasure and teachers' pain from a utilitarian ground, without forcing teachers to simply be patient. The argument is that although teachers may sometimes feel pain, the sensation is, in fact, a pleasure. If a teacher's suffering and sacrifice contribute to

students' happiness, as an educator, he or she should feel a sublime pleasure. Mark Tunick has discussed the complexity in defining who feels pleasure or pain from certain experiences. He carefully studied a case of a Japanese woman, who committed *oya-ko sinju*, or parent-child suicide, in California twenty-five years ago. This woman, whose name is Ms. Kimura, believed that after learning about her husband's extramarital affair, she and her two children should choose an honourable death rather than a shameful life (Tunick, 2005, p. 834). Let us imagine that educational reformers take advantage of these cultural and individual differences, dismiss Tunick's original intention and advocate that teachers make honourable self-sacrifices, as if the more they abstain from pleasure, the happier their students become. How could teachers or Millian utilitarians resist this compulsion? Could this enforced sacrifice really be called a happy relationship in classrooms?

### HAPPINESS DESIRED AND DESIRE SILENCED

Stanley Cavell takes a different approach to make sense of Mill's utilitarianism with regard to the conflict between nourishment and restriction of pleasure. While critics of utilitarianism show contempt for pleasure as sensory satisfaction and insist on the need for sublimation, such as enjoyment of self-sacrifice, Cavell reads a richer implication into Mill's text. To Cavell, Mill's emphasis on pleasure does not necessarily mean confirmation of self-greed: 'To the objection that pleasure is an inferior form of happiness, Mill's answer is that this merely shows an inferior ability to imagine causes and kinds of pleasure' (Cavell, 2004, p. 86). Pleasure does not inherently undermine the life, but a poor conception of it does.

How could this understanding differ from the forced sublimation of pleasure? In other words, how does Mill respond to the command 'you ought to feel *this* as pleasure, even though this tastes bitter at first'? Here, Cavell cites famous phrases of Mill's:

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it; the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it (Mill, 1991, p. 168).

Cavell then adds, 'to say that happiness is desirable is not to say that happiness ought to be desired but that it is good to have it' (Cavell, 2004, p. 95). The enforced 'ought to' does not lead us to happiness, as self-evident desire does.

This does not mean that Mill-Cavell limitlessly let personal desire be pursued. They pay attention, of course, to what Tunick calls 'the harm principle' (Tunick, 2005, p. 1), which we discussed in the last section. Mill says that personal interests 'authorize the subjection of individual spontaneity to external control' when their actions concern the interest of other people (Mill, 1991, p. 15). Cavell mentions that some critics argue the harm principle does not work because, according to them, 'any action has consequences and effects beyond the control of its agent, and if we had to consider these as far as our imaginations might run, we would all become Hamlets',

worrying 'as if any act were as risky as shooting an arrow' (Cavell, 2004, p. 92). In other words, a limit for an ever-expanding ego could constrict people's actions significantly. As Cavell himself indicates, however, Mill's answer is clear: the harm principle is applied when 'a person is led to violate a distinct and assignable obligation to any other person or persons ...' (Mill, 1991, p. 90).<sup>2</sup> But where does this obligation come from? Cavell reads Mill's sentence from the other side of the coin: he writes that an individual's action harms others when it is considered as his or her 'distinct and assignable violation of another's constituted rights' (Cavell, 2004, p. 92).

If this 'constituted right' contains the right to pursue happiness, are we still stuck with the same dilemma? After rejecting the idea of distributing sublime pleasure, isn't there any way to free each person's pursuit of happiness from conflicts with others' pursuits? There may be conflicts with others. There may or may not be solutions for them. It is possible to say that we have found the correct and efficient answer. To Cavell, however, Mill's real mission is not to offer a solution for promoting pleasure, but to *awaken* us to the question of whether we really are pursuing our own happiness. Mill states in a passage that Cavell calls 'the climax' of *On Liberty*:

In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, everyone lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves, what do I prefer? Or, what would suit my character and disposition? Or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my situation and pecuniary circumstance? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstance superior to mine? I do not mean that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done; peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct are shunned equally with crime until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starve; they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature (Mill, 1991, p. 68)?<sup>3</sup>

We do not desire what we truly desire: instead, we desire what others desire. When others do not actually desire what they think they want, we all believe that desire is just a longing for the self to catch up with what others want, do, or have. We are, to put it differently, deprived of desire. Thus, we are in despair, no matter how much we are obsessed with wanting something every single day. This is a condition R. W. Emerson calls 'secret melancholy' and H. D. Thoreau calls 'quiet desperation' (Cavell, 2004, p. 97).<sup>4</sup> We discuss this subject further in the next section.

## BEGINNING FROM DESPAIR

The quotation from *On Liberty* eloquently presents human voicelessness. In the restless life driven by our desire for conformity, we are prevented from desiring our true desire. This is the condition in which we are blocked from even asking ourselves whether such a life is desirable. Cavell says that Mill's philosophical mission is to awaken us to the question: Is this, or is this not, the desirable condition of human nature? He tries to show that it *is* a question. Otherwise, the idea hardly occurs to us that we keep letting our desire go unheard, our voice unknown. Human dispossession and voicelessness are articulated by such expressions as 'secret melancholy' and 'quiet desperation'.

If this is the situation we are in, demanding sublimation is the wrong cure for conflicting desires. We do not lose control of our desire: we have lost an access to it. This is why Mill thinks that 'the danger which threatens human nature is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences' (Mill, 1991, p. 68). In this sense, as Cavell puts it, despair is, in a democracy, 'a political emotion' (Cavell, 2004, p. 98). He continues:

That is, 'secret' and 'quiet' indicate that voices withheld from the commonwealth, weakening confidence on both, on all, sides. As if we see no hope of making our lives intelligible. Then there is no hope of achieving a moral, an examined, existence together (*ibid.*).

Withdrawal of voices weakens confidence—of the society and individuals—because it deprives us of the hope that we can aspire to a desirable society.

This is not to say that we should blindly believe that an ideal society is possible. Such misconception degrades hope into the enforcement of standing desire. What is expected here, on the contrary, is recovery from despair.<sup>5</sup> It is a recovery enabled by reengagement with one's desire, and reaffirmation of the society by means of, and in the process of, confirming and examining one's own voice. It is a recovery from boundless restrictions on one's actions, caused by our caution of violating others' rights only if we are trying to make our rights distinct and assignable to others.

This recovery does not, however, insinuate that communication ultimately solves all. Rather, this reengagement begins with, and directs us to be open to, disagreement. Cavell articulates that despair is a political emotion and relates it to the perspectives of distance and closeness. On one hand, despair comprises enough distance 'to see society as a whole' (*ibid.*). It is linked to 'closeness sufficient to hear his own voice in response to his role in it, to express his consent to its existence by chastising it' (*ibid.*), on the other hand.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the movement of recovery is characterized as simultaneous returning and departing. Borrowing Emerson's expression, Cavell depicts this movement as aversion to conformity (Cavell, 1990, p. 37). While disagreement in empirical research studies requires us to settle by exchanging different views, that in aversive thinking leads us to the significance of self-evidence, a significance that 'each of us has to speak for himself or for herself' (Cavell, 2004, p. 96).

This is the reason why aversive thinking plays a central role in Emersonian Moral Perfectionism.<sup>7</sup> Cavell paraphrases the question at the conclusion of the climatic section of *On Liberty*: 'Do you ..., under any circumstances, desire this censored

condition of mankind' (Cavell, 1990, p. 63)? He calls this 'Perfectionism's question, its reading of the cry of freedom, for a life of one's own, of one's choice, that one consents to with one's own voice' (*ibid.*). We are morally voiceless at the beginning of our moral thinking. We need to reaffirm what our freedom means to us or what choices we have in our society with our own voice. At the same time, however, 'an essential place for perfection' (p. 62) occurs as a sign of the moral life, a sign that is exemplified as a question in a text, in Mill's case especially.

Emersonian Moral Perfectionism is, therefore, not characterized by diminution of imperfection but, rather, the occurrence of desiring perfection, or of perfecting. Though it by no means prohibits a person from estimating one's degree of imperfection using one's view of moral ends as its measure, the central concern of Emersonian Perfectionism lies in how such moral interests of a person could be possible in the first place. 'Perfectionism is the dimension of moral thought directed less to restraining the bad than to releasing the good, as from a despair of good (of good and bad in each of us)', Cavell says (p. 18). Moral thinking, as an examination of what is (conventionally) conceived as morally good and bad, is enabled by questioning our desire and our condition's desirability. This involves transfiguration of the self as a moral being and its relation to society.

## CONCLUSION: THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS AS PERFECTION OF THE TEACHER

'Do you desire it?' Mill's perfectionist question is 'a question about ourselves' (Cavell, 2004, p. 97) and, hence, is also about the withdrawal of individual voice and the confidence in society. Based on the fact that 'no one is in principle in a better position to answer it [Mill's question] than each of us' (*ibid.*), our sense of despair is a political emotion in democracy. Getting back to our initial concern, teachers' and students' despair becomes an *educational* emotion in democratic classrooms. It is the emotion that has been numbed to ask: Is it really our choice whether students' or teachers' happiness comes first? Do we really desire the choice itself? In taking up the institution of marriage—an issue that Mill and Cavell share a common interest—, Cavell says that it 'is open to our judgment, requires our affirmation', like an 'institution of political society as such' (p. 100). In the same sense, happiness in the classroom is not the same as promoting what is called happiness in general. Rather, it requires reaffirmation and reengagement by each teacher and student in *that* classroom, since no one but them are in a better position to answer the questions: Do we desire the condition of the classroom, its teaching and learning? Thus, the obvious but forgotten connection that 'if children are to be happy in schools, their teachers should also be happy' (Noddings, 2003, p. 261) shall be recalled not with solution or distribution, but with a cry of perfection, a moral thinking that furthers each of them towards beginning with, and transfiguration in, the classroom.

Let me add the final quotations of Mill's, which are, however, not from *On Liberty* or *Utilitarianism* but from *Autobiography*, which Cavell calls 'fantastic, and moving' (Cavell, 2004, p. 83). There are descriptions about his 'well-known mental crisis in his youth' (Donner, 1991, p. 8). One day, a question occurred to him: 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you' (Mill, 1981, p. 139)? His 'irrepressible

self-consciousness' answered "No!" (*ibid.*). From then, he started to feel: 'All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for' (*ibid.*). It seems, to him, that his education, which was 'wholly his [father James Mill's] work', had irremediably 'failed' (*ibid.*). Mill names this period as 'the dry heavy dejection of the melancholy winter' (p. 143). 'A small ray of light', after approximately half a year, 'broke in upon my gloom' (p. 145), he writes. Accidentally, he read J. F. Marmontel's *Memoirs* and came to the passage 'which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy,<sup>8</sup> felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them—would supply the place of all that they had lost' (*ibid.*).<sup>9</sup> Mill felt that a 'vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over' (*ibid.*). He continues: 'The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless: ... I had still, it seemed, some of the material out of which all worth of character, and all capacity for happiness, are made' (*ibid.*).

The melancholy and recovery depicted here may shed light on an autobiographical aspect of Mill's philosophy. Ironically, to young Mill, his self-questioning and his double's response led him to dejection. This appears to counter the view that his future Perfectionist question holds a mission to help people in taking a step from despair. It is true that young Mill's self-conversation caused him severe melancholy, but it took a form of symptoms of psychological depression. What is also inferred here, nevertheless, is that he became aware of, and, thus, started to depart from, quietness or secrecy of philosophical despair. This entanglement is one of the reasons why Cavell thinks that an awakening is also a crisis (Cavell, 1972, p. 100).

Taking such complexity and richness into consideration, it is clear that this study is only at the entrance of reading the connection between autobiography and philosophy. Even so, we have reached, at least, enough point to ask the followings: Is it possible to hear the voice of Mill's perfectionist sign? Is it possible to see a sign of the teacher as a learner in despair, or a future questioner? If it is audible or visible, it requires examination as a turning point in education, a declaration of a child, or a re-beginning of the pursuit of happiness.

## NOTES

- 1 This paper deals with utilitarianism as an essential doctrine of Mill's philosophy. Bentham, of course, is an unignorable figure in this theoretical group. He invented the phrase 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people'. This study, however, does not equate utilitarianism to Bentham's theory because, as Wendy Donner indicates, Mill rejects much of classical Benthamite utilitarianism and redefines it, especially by means of exploring the qualitative aspect of pleasure, in which Bentham shows little interest (Donner, 1991, pp. 1; 8). I shall discuss Mill's notion of the quality of pleasure later.
- 2 Cavell sees an underlying deontological notion in Mill's utilitarianism here (Cavell, 2004, p. 92).
- 3 This passage of Mill's appears at least twice in full in Cavell's books (Cavell, 1990, pp. 62-63; 2004, pp. 96-97). Though it looks like a relatively long quote, I am hesitant to break this into pieces and write it in the same manner as Cavell does. The condensed quality of the text is acclaimed as follows: 'If a bible of perfectionism were to be put together, the paragraph of Mill's containing this perception, together with whatever is necessary to understand it, would demand prominence in it' (Cavell, 2004, p. 98).
- 4 Emerson asks: 'Is it strange that society should be devoured by a secret melancholy, which breaks through all its smiles, and all its gayety and games' (Emerson, 1990, p. 278)? Thoreau senses: 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation' (Thoreau, 1997, p. 9).

- 5 Fulford presents an intense discussion on the theme of recovery of voice in classrooms, relating the silencing of voice to Thoreau's notion of 'quiet desperation' (Fulford, 2009, p. 231). She calls for attention to the danger that educational aids such as writing frames, which are widely adopted in academic writing courses in current British universities, suppress students' individual expressions, rather than helping them to find their own voices in the process of writing (pp. 232-233). The silencing of voice is, she points out, a 'threat' to democratic society since self-reliant individuals, who are averse to conformity, contribute to the 'society, and its religion, arts and culture' (p. 231). 'If the denial of voice is a denial of the self,' she argues, 'then the recovery of voice is a finding of voice a *continual* process of re-finding one's self' (p. 235). Borrowing her point, it is possible to say that to have a language for one's own desire does not mean to possess fixed frames for sorting one's wants and needs. Rather, giving an expression for desire signifies creation and re-creation of desire, in the ongoing process of re-finding of the self.
- 6 This reengagement with society (and with the self as a sociopolitical entity) connotes Cavell's response to skepticism. Neither total separation from the community nor conformity to it exempts us from skepticism. If a person is totally separated from the community, she feels that she has no power to affect others. The minds of others remain unintelligible to her. In a state of conformity, by contrast, our voices are hardly heard; a voice to declare that 'I think I am' (Cavell, 1990, p. 47) or that the world exists.
- 7 In a chapter named 'Aversive Thinking' in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Cavell describes the idea of the perfectionism by means of reading Emerson's texts (especially 'The American Scholar' and 'Self-Reliance') (pp. 33-63). Aversive thinking is discussed as a process of separating ourselves from conformity, and, thus, from ourselves as we stand (p. 47). The process of Emerson's thinking has two names in Perfectionism: transfiguration or conversion (p. 36).
- 8 Presumably, he was around fifteen years old (Marmontel, 1956, p. 39).
- 9 Marmontel describes the scene as follows: 'I arrive at the door at midnight; I knock; I tell my name. Instantly arises a plaintive murmur, a confusion of voices in distress. The whole family rise; the door is opened, and, on entering, I am encircled by this distracted family; mother, children, old women—all half naked, like spectres—extend their arms to me with the most piercing and heart-rending cries. I found suddenly within me a new strength, such, doubtless, as Nature reserves for extreme misery. I never felt so superior to myself. An enormous weight of grief was laid upon me. I did not sink under it. I opened my arms, my bosom, to this crowd of unhappy beings. I embraced them all, and, with the firmness of a man inspired by heaven, I, who weep so easily, now showed no weakness and shed no tear. "My mother, my brothers, my sisters," said I, "we are suffering the greatest calamities; but let us not sink under its pressure. My children, you lose a father; you find one again. I will supply his place; [I] am, I will be, your father. I take upon myself all his duties, and you are orphans no more"' (pp. 45-46). Is this a cry of a self-sacrifice? Or a Perfectionist call for the pursuit of happiness?

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