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## psychiatry in philosophy

### John Stuart Mill: recurrent depressive disorder; bibliotherapy; happiness, altruism, compassion and empathy

Greg Wilkinson

J. S. Mill (1806–1873), pre-eminent political, economic and social philosopher of the 19th century, describes 'A crisis in my mental history' in his *Autobiography*. A Utilitarian, he held that happiness – intended pleasure and absence of pain – is the sole end of human action; famously, in *On Liberty* he wrote: 'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others'.

From the winter of 1821 his aim in life was to be a reformer of the world and his conception of his own happiness was identified with this object:

'But the time came [in autumn 1826] when I awakened from this as from a dream [...] I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent; [...] In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, "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?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. 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. [...] Hardly anything had power to cause me even a few minutes oblivion of it. For some months the cloud seemed to grow thicker and thicker' (*Autobiography*, chapter V).

Mill frequently asked himself if he could, or if he was bound to, go on living like that; and he generally answered that he did not think he could bear it beyond a year. However, after around 6 months:

'a small ray of light broke in upon my gloom. I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's "Mémoires", 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, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them – would supply the place of all that they had lost. A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burthen grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless [...] Relieved from my ever present sense of irremediable wretchedness [...] Thus the cloud gradually drew off, and I again enjoyed life: and though I had several relapses, some of which lasted many months, I never again was as miserable as I had been' (*Autobiography*, chapter V).

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