Welcome back. Today we’re going to discuss the first of the two modern moral theories that we’re gonna cover in this course. Today we’ll be talking about John Stuart Mill’s theory known as Utilitarianism. In subsequent lectures we'll talk about Immanuel Kant’s moral theory. These will be the two modern moral theories that we discuss in this course. They are indeed the dominant moral theories even today. In an introductory level course, if you discuss any two moral theories these are the two moral theories that you would discuss.

Remember what a moral theory is. A moral theory is devoted to identifying the common characteristics of right or wrong actions. So we look to moral theory to tell us what is it about actions that make them morally right, what is it about actions that make them morally wrong. To put it another way, what does moral wrongness consist of and what does moral rightness consist of? What is that common quality that all wrong actions have and that all right actions have by virtue of which they are respectively right and wrong?

I would argue that — and, of course, this could be a matter of contention. I would argue that utilitarianism is the dominant moral theory in the western world today. Others might take issue with that. Certainly if there’s any rival to utilitarianism’s dominance it’s going to be some version of Kantianism. But as I understand the public ethos in the United States, England, and other western countries, it would seem to me that the overwhelming number of people -- you were to sort of try and discern what sort of ethical view they have, you’d find a lot of utilitarian ideas.

John Stuart Mill is not the creator of utilitarianism. That credit has to go to a philosopher born to the previous generation, Jeremy Bentham. He is the originator, the creator, of the utilitarian theory but Mill is its most sophisticated and most articulate and most famous spokesman. So the theory originates with Bentham but in Mill it receives its most sophisticated, fullest, and most influential treatment.
Let me just say a couple of things about John Stuart Mill by way of biography. John Stuart Mill was the son of James Mill who was a philosopher in his own right and was a passionate supporter and advocate of Bentham’s utilitarianism. Part of the reason why Mill was a utilitarian was because his father was a utilitarian and indeed a very outspoken advocate of utilitarianism.

Mill was a child prodigy. His father, in a sense, wanted to prepare his son, John, to lead the charge for utilitarianism in the public sphere and so his father very much molded and shaped the younger Mill’s education and intellect from the beginning in a way that I think today we’d find objectionable. I mean, the father really, in a sense, denied his son a childhood in order to train him to become the supreme utilitarian. Mill was reading Latin and Greek at the age of 10. In Mill’s autobiography, which is one of the great examples of the genre — there’s a handful of great autobiographies of great intellectuals, the greatest probably being Saint Augustine's. But, of course, there’s also John Jacques Rousseau’s confessions, and John Stuart Mill’s autobiography certainly has to rank among the greatest of this genre of literature.

Mill later in life suffered a terrible, catastrophic nervous breakdown. There’s no question that a lot of it had to do with the intense pressure that his father put upon him as a young child to perform and to absorb a level of education and instruction that I think any of us today would find — would deem oppressive. When he was older, Mill worked for the British East India company which was one of the largest and most prosperous companies of the empire, the British Empire. He served a brief stint as a member of parliament representing the City of London and Westminster from 1865 to 1868. Mill was an active proponent of progressive and liberal causes. Remember, whenever we use words like progressive and liberal, what they mean is somewhat relative to the times. What counts as progressive in Victorian England is gonna be very different from what counts as progressive today. Most of the things that mill argued for
are things that no one today would disagree with. And so while they may have seemed radical in Victorian England, they’re certainly not considered radical today.

One of Mill’s major causes was women’s suffrage: women’s right to vote, to own property, sort of basic human rights that we take for granted today. I can’t imagine anyone today in the United States or England, or anywhere else in the west, who would say that women ought not to vote or ought not to be able to own property or ought not be able to become educated. But, of course, they were not allowed to do any of these things not long ago and Mill was one of the earliest proponents of women’s suffrage and one of the most influential advocates of basic liberal ideas.

Some of his major works include a system of logic, principles of political economy, on liberty, utilitarianism, and a short essay on the subjection of women in which he made the case for women’s liberation in the basic sense of voting rights and things like this which I think today we would find utterly obvious and unobjectionable. But Mill is most famous for being a philosopher. Indeed, he is most famous — bad English — he’s most famous for his version of the utilitarian ethic and for the theory of liberty that he presents in the book on liberty.

Underlying Mill’s moral philosophy, underlying the utilitarian account of right and wrong, is a certain conception of value which it’s essential that we understand. There is a conception — if you remember this from our discussions of Aristotle, Aristotle talks about the human good, what constitutes human fulfillment, what is the valuable human life. Mill also is going to have a conception of value, that which is valuable and what are the hierarchies of value. Of all the things that have value, what are their relative places with respect to one another in the hierarchy of value.

And unless we understand Mill’s conception of value, we won’t understand his moral philosophy. His moral philosophy is built directly out of this theory of value. And there’s a great sense to this, right? When we talk about morality, we talk about
obligation. What are we obliged to do, what are we obliged to refrain from doing. When we talk about value, we talk about that which is of the greatest importance, that which is of the most significance, that which matters the most. And certainly there’s gonna be a relationship between that which is of the greatest value, that which is of the most significance, and that which we are obliged to do and that which we are obliged not to do. I would suppose that as a general matter one is going to be morally obliged to do — to promote that which is of the greatest value and to discourage that which detracts from or takes away from or obstructs that which is of value. So there’s a sort of obvious intuitive relationship between conceptions of value on the one hand and conceptions of moral obligation on the other. In Mill’s theory the relationship is sort of seamless, as will become evident when we get to the specifics.

Value comes in two essential varieties. On the one hand there are things whose value is instrumental. We call these things instrumental goods. An instrumental good is something whose value depends upon the value of something else. That is, something that’s an instrumental good has no inherent value. Its value is derivative.

So the best example probably for our purposes will be money.

Imagine, you know, a ten dollar bill. What is a ten dollar bill? It’s a piece of green paper. Inherently, in and of itself, it has no value whatsoever. The value of the ten dollar bill is derivative of the value of the things that can be purchased with it. So suppose that a ten dollar bill will buy me a carton of milk, a thing of eggs, and a pound of hamburger meat. Maybe this is optimistic, but let’s just pretend that. What that means is that the value of that ten dollar bill is really a function of the value of those things: the value of the milk, the value of the eggs, the value of the hamburger meat. The ten dollar bill’s value is directly derived from the value of those things to which it is an instrument. I’m trying to use the lingo that we get comfortable with it. The ten dollar bill’s value is instrumental to the purchase of these things which themselves are
objects of value. So some things are instrumental goods. Their value lies in the fact that they are instruments to other things of value. In the case of money, the kind of instrument it is, it is a purchasing instrument. Its value lies in the fact that it allows you to obtain things of value.

Now, the other variety of value we call intrinsic value. There’s some things that are intrinsically good. And when we say that something is intrinsically good, we mean its value is inherent in it. It is valuable in and of itself. To speak as Aristotle would, an intrinsic good is an end in itself. It is not a means to any further end. It is not an instrument to any further good. Its good is inherent in itself.

Typically, when a philosopher constructs a value theory, the ultimate idea is to identify that thing or those things which are intrinsically good. Because it’s the intrinsic good or goods that are going to be the most directly related to our moral obligations. So, for example, I don’t think that anybody thinks that there’s sort of a moral obligation to give people — that people should have money because money is sort of, you know, simply an instrument. There may be a moral obligation, for example, to help people stay alive. In order to stay alive they need food. In order to get food they need money. But then the moral obligation ties really to what’s intrinsically good, to what’s an end in itself: helping people to stay alive. The instrument is only incidentally related to that end, right? One can imagine a place in which there is no currency. In which case, giving somebody a stack or a pile of ten dollar bills won’t do them any good at all with respect to eating and therefore staying alive.

So a philosopher typically who’s constructing a value system constructs it with the idea of identifying the intrinsic good or intrinsic goods because it’s the intrinsic good or goods which are directly relevant to the question of moral obligation: what we’re obliged to do, what we’re obliged to refrain from doing.

Now, Mill argues that there is just one intrinsic good. There’s only one thing that
is valuable in and of itself and all other goods, Mill says, are instruments to that intrinsic
good. Mill says the only intrinsic good is happiness. So the only thing Mill says that’s
valuable — that he believes is valuable in and of itself is happiness. Everything else
that we deem to be of value is a value only because of the happiness either that it
produces directly or indirectly. Mill says this very clearly. One of the wonderful things
about reading Mill is that he is a crystal clear expositor.

Looking in your reading here, page 35, Mill says this straight out. He says,
quote — the second paragraph: “The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable
and the only thing desirable as an end, all other things being only desirable as means to
that end.” So Mill is laying out a proposal — an account of the intrinsic good. He’s
saying, “Here’s what I think. It seems to me that the only thing valuable in and of itself
is happiness. That’s the only thing that people desire for its own sake. Everything
else that’s of value, everything else that we desire, is desired or valued as a means to
happiness, either directly or indirectly.”

Now, this sounds plausible enough but, of course, its plausibility rests entirely
upon how we interpret the word *happiness*. What does Mill mean by happiness? And
here what Mill says, I think again, is perfectly reasonable but it’s slightly more
controversial than it would be if we simply left happiness undefined and to people’s
imagination. Mill defines happiness as pleasure in the absence of pain. He says this
on page 7. Page 7, middle of that first large paragraph, he says: “By happiness is
intended pleasure in the absence of pain, by unhappiness pain and the privation of
pleasure.”

And so to now bundle this together with the initial statement of the intrinsic good,
what Mill is saying is this. The only thing valuable in and of itself is pleasure in the
absence of pain, and the value of everything else lies in the capacity to create pleasure
and to lessen pain. The theory that pleasure is the only intrinsic good is known as
hedonism and it's an ancient theory. This is not a theory that Mill invented. I am aware that the word *hedonism* has a modern connotation and we want to be careful to not impose the modern meaning of the word on the ancient meaning and on Mill's meaning. Now, certainly the modern meaning of the word is derived from the ancient meaning and from the meaning that Mill has in mind. But if we impose our current conception of hedonism on Mill and on the text, I think it will confuse us.

The word *hedonism* today — when we describe someone as hedonistic, it's typically a criticism. What we mean, you know, is sort of a wild partying type, a crazy pleasure seeker. The word *hedonism*, all that it means technically is that pleasure is the intrinsic good. That is all that hedonism means. Now, how that is understood varies. Indeed, the doctrine goes back as far — at least as far as ancient Greece and can claim two sources, two ancient Greek sources. One of the Dionysian cults, religious sects, centered around the god Dionysus and the other are the epicurean schools, the schools that were developed around the philosophy of the philosopher Epicurus. These are two very different versions of hedonism.

On the Dionysian view, happiness equals pleasure and pleasure is understood in terms of extreme, intense, typically physical pleasures. So this is sort of the hedonism we're more familiar with today. When you hear the word *hedonism*, what you're typically thinking of is something whose origins lie in the Dionysian ecstasy cult in which ecstatic pleasures were conceived of as a form of worship.

The Epicurean version is very different. The Epicureans emphasized milder, more moderate pleasures, especially pleasures that derived from the intellect, intellectual pleasures. For the Epicurean, happiness is more a state of tranquility or contentment than a pleasure in the sense that we think of it today. It's this Epicurean version of hedonism that Mill is appealing to, right? Mill doesn't say that happiness is simply pleasure. He says it's pleasure and the absence of pain. So not only does this
tell us that Mill thinks that freedom from pain, which I would describe as a state of contentment — that freedom from pain is a part of what happiness consists of. But by putting together pleasure and the absence of pain, it rules out those intense sorts of pleasures which have pain as their ultimate result.

So think, for example, of the intensity of pleasure that comes from a lot of drinking, but then the pain that follows — the pain that comes and the hangover that follows, right? The Epicurean conception of happiness rules this kind of pleasure out. Because happiness consists not just in pleasure but also in the absence of pain. So by defining happiness as pleasure in the absence of pain, Mill is clearly and explicitly aligning himself with the Epicurean, hedonist tradition.

Now, let me just say something about defining happiness this way. When we read Aristotle, happiness had a very unusual definition. Happiness for Aristotle means something like human excellence or human flourishing, and certainly that’s not what most people mean when they use the word happiness today. I would suggest that what Mill is — the way that Mill is defining happiness is very much the way people mean it today. When we use the word happy, when I say I’m happy, I typically mean something like I’m currently feeling good. We use the word happy to denote a positive, pleasurable sensation or feeling.

And so I think that Mill’s definition here is very much consistent with common usage even today. And because he defines it as pleasure and the absence of pain, he can capture the sense in which happiness is both a kind of positive experience, experience of a positive sensation, but the sense also which happiness is a negative experience in the sense of a lack of something, lack of pain and trouble. I don’t mean negative experience isn’t bad, but negative experience meaning the lack of something rather than the addition of something. You can think of happiness as the addition of something, the adding of pleasurable sensation, or the lack of something, the removing
of bad sensation, of pain.

Now, Mill admits that the hedonic theory of value admits of no proof. That is, how can you prove that happiness, a.k.a. pleasure in the absence of pain — how can you prove that that is what’s intrinsically good? Mill says there’s no proof. Indeed, there’s never going to be any proof for fundamental values. Fundamental values in a sense provide the basis on which we can then go on to say things about ethics and about morality, but there isn’t going to be any proof for the fundamental values. Either they’re intuitively compelling to us or they’re not.

What Mill says, though, is that — the hedonic theory, Mill thinks, has a great deal of intuitive support. Mill points out that the question what is of value, what is valuable, is the same question as the question what is desirable. He says, “Look. It’s very easy to find out what’s desirable. Ask people what they desire. And that’s all the proof you’re gonna get and that’s all the proof that you need.” If I’m trying to promote the theory that what people like is hotdogs, it’s very easy to find out whether that’s true or not. You go ask people, “Do you like hotdogs?” There’s really no more proof that you could get than that, of the truth of the statement.

Similarly here Mill says, “Look. To ask what’s intrinsically good is to ask what people desire above all else, and the only answer to that is going to be to ask them.” That’s the only proof one’s going to get for whatever position you put forward. And Mill alleges that the view that pleasure in the absence of pain is inherently desirable is the view of the every man. Mill wants to claim that his view represents the common sense, the common understanding.

I think he’s on very strong ground here. I think if you sort of took a random sample from people on the street and asked them to list the things that are of value to them, and then to ask them why those things are of value to them, ultimately the answer to all the whys is going to point to “they make me happy” in this sense of happiness.
Feeling good rather than feeling bad.

I think that Mill is right that the view has tremendous intuitive appeal. He talks about this on page 35. This is the first page of the chapter entitled “Of what sort of proof is the principle of utility susceptible?” He says in the first sentence, “Questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof in the ordinary exception of the term.” Further down, the next paragraph, he says, “Questions about ends are questions about what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable and the only thing desirable is an end,” yadda-yadda-yadda.

He then goes on to say, “The sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it. If the end was the utilitarian document proposes to itself or not in theory and in practice acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable except that each person so far as he believes it to be attainable desires his own happiness. This being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of but all which it is possible to require.”

It seems to me that you could make another argument on behalf of hedonism and I would call this an argument from modern science. If we look to what modern science tells us about human nature and human behavior, I think we will find that there is a broad consensus among those scientists involved in the study of human nature that human behavior ultimately stems from a handful of fundamental imperatives. These are the imperatives that are uncovered not only by psychologists but also by genetic theorists. These fundamental imperatives, science tells us, are the imperative to survive, the imperative to reproduce, the imperative to avoid pain, and to pursue pleasure. These are the most fundamental imperatives. That all human behavior, all other motivations, are ultimately driven by these base motivations. This certainly is what a sociobiologist would tell you.
Interestingly enough, this is essentially the argument that Bentham makes in his work, in his moral philosophy, and his most important work is called *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. He begins the book with the statement, quote, “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure,” unquote. So the utilitarian can claim not only that the hedonic theory of value reflects and represents the common sense of mankind. The utilitarian can also argue that the thesis that pleasure is the intrinsic good is supported by the modern scientific picture of human nature and human behavior. I think that for these two reasons utilitarianism and particularly hedonism as a value system is very powerful. If it’s going to be opposed, there are going to have to be very serious and equally compelling objections, some of which we will discuss here. As a matter of fact, one of which we’ll discuss right now.

The chief complaint about hedonism historically has been that it presents human beings in an undignified light. So the chief complaint — whenever anybody sort of proposes or expresses support for a hedonic conception of value, the typical complaint is, “Well, you’re making human beings out to be nothing better than animals.” That is the typical complaint. Mill quotes precisely such an objection. He voices this objection. In other words, Mill — and this is always the hallmark of a good philosopher, that a good philosopher anticipates the possible objections to his own view. The philosopher doesn’t simply state his view. He tries to anticipate the potential objections and respond to them. Mill, very early on in the book, anticipates precisely this objection. If you look on page 7, the last large paragraph, he’s talking about his own theory. He says, “Such a theory of life excites in many minds inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has, as they express it, no higher end than pleasure, no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit, they designate as utterly mean and groveling as a doctrine worthy only of swine.”
So Mill is anticipating that this is what's going to be said to him. “Well, you’re saying that the only thing that’s valuable at the end of the day is pleasure? Well, you’re making human beings to be no better than dogs or pigs.” Mill’s reply is clever. What I like about Mill’s reply is I think it’s both clever — it’s a kind of — sort of a jujitsu kind of reply. It turns the objection on the critic. But I also think it’s a very fair one. Mill says the following. He says, “It’s not the hedonist who’s presenting human beings in a negative light. It’s you, the critic, who’s presenting human beings in a negative light. Because you the critic, in objecting as you are, are implying that the only pleasures that human beings are capable of are animal pleasures.”

So the critic says, “Well, how can you say that human beings are motivated by nothing but pleasure? That makes a human being out to be a dog or no better than a dog or a pig.” To which the hedonist replies, “Wait a minute. I didn’t say that human beings are made happy by piggish pleasures. You’re implying that.”

Thus far we’ve said nothing about what human happiness is comprised of. We know that human happiness is pleasure in the absence of pain. But pleasure in the absence of pain in what sense? Which pleasures do human beings seek out? Which pains do we seek to avoid? And why does the critic assume that it’s going to be animal pleasures? And if the critic assumes that, who is it that has the negative picture of human nature? The hedonist or the critic? That’s what Mill is saying.

And, of course, he’s a much better writer than I am so why don’t we read what he says. He says, at the bottom of page 7, quote, “When thus attacked, the Epicureans” — and, see, he’s connecting himself to the Epicurean — the ancient Epicurean hedonist tradition. He says, “When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered that it is not they but their accusers who represent human nature in a degrading light. Since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures, it’s those of which swine are capable.” Mill then goes on to argue that human beings are capable
of a much higher form of pleasure than the animals and that indeed it is these higher pleasures which comprise human happiness, not the lower bestial pleasures of animals.

Now, what exactly do I mean by higher pleasures? What does Mill mean by higher pleasures? Well, what Mill wants to indicate are those pleasures that arise out of the intersection of sensation on the one hand and intelligence on the other. That human beings are capable of a type of pleasure that involves both sensation and intelligence, and these pleasures are the distinctively human pleasures and they’re the pleasures that comprise human happiness.

So let me just give some examples. What I’m gonna do is I’m going to pair a purely animalistic, bestial pleasure with its distinctive human counterpart. I think, then, that this distinction between higher and lower pleasures will become clear. So let’s take a typical, common pleasure: lust. Every species has to reproduce and every species has some form inherent in its genetic code, some form of lusting. In a lot of animals it’s a period of going into heat. It’s a period where the animal becomes sexually charged and overwhelmed with desire to copulate. Let’s just name this lust. And certainly human beings can have this sensation. Mill is not denying that human beings have animal pleasures. What he’s denying is that they only have animal pleasures and that the animal pleasures comprise human happiness. That’s what he’s denying.

So on the one hand we have lust, a purely bestial animal pleasure that consists of nothing more than sensation, a strong urge to copulate. Now let’s take its higher counterpart, love — the sentiment of love. Now, love certainly includes — and I’m talking about romantic love. There are many varieties of love that, of course, have no sexual component at all. I’m talking about romantic love. Think about romantic love. Romantic love certainly includes that physical component. There certainly is wrapped up in romantic love the desire to copulate. But that’s not all that romantic love consists
Indeed, romantic love consists of any number of profound levels of consciousness about one’s sensations with respect to the other person. Think about it. Romantic love leads people to write beautiful poetry, create beautiful works of art. These arise from their meditation upon their feelings for the other person.

And so we have in the case of love, I think, a very clear instance of where human intelligence and rationality are being brought to bear on a set of bestial sensations. Certainly love begins in a certain number of bestial feelings towards the other person. But because we’re human beings and have the capacity not simply to feel but to think, we reflect upon, meditate upon, conceptualize these sensations and thus this produces an entirely different and an entirely more elevated form of pleasure, one of which a dog is not capable, one of which only a human being with his distinctive, unique mental equipment is capable.

Let me use another less racy example for those of you who perhaps didn’t enjoy this example. Let me give you another one that I think no one will object to. Let’s distinguish between, on the one hand, the pleasure that arises from the mere satiating of one’s hunger. So you’re starving and you just shove a bunch of food down your throat, and you have that wonderful sated feeling afterwards. Let loose a big sigh. This is a purely bestial, physical, sensory pleasure you can see any animal doing. Go to The Animal Channel and watch what the lion does after he snarfs down a zebra, lies there with his big belly hanging out — well, I shouldn’t talk about big bellies — lies there and looks very contented. Let’s call that the pleasure of satedness or satiation.

Now, let’s contrast that with the pleasures associated with what we call gastronomy, the love of good food and drink. Now again, certainly human beings are capable of the pleasure of mere satiation and certainly the pleasures of gastronomy begin with or at least are in part comprised of that physical — that purely bestial sense of pleasure. But there’s so much more to them and the so much more is largely in
Think about the difference between simply, you know, food as a kind of fuel that you shove down your throat to keep your engine going and food as it is presented, let’s say, in a fine restaurant or in a carefully prepared meal. There’s a level of artistry, there’s a level of care, there’s a level of consciousness about what one is doing. There’s consciousness even in the selection of what the courses should be and how they should complement one another, and how the different flavors should go together, and whether something should be spicy and then afterwards perhaps cool and refreshing, and so on and so forth. These are all dimensions of the gastronomical pleasure that come from the application of the mind, of the intellect, to the physical process of eating and the physical enjoyments that come from satiating one’s hunger.

And again, the pleasure of gastronomy, the higher pleasure, is a distinctively human one. Dogs and cats and lions and bears don’t have gastronomic enjoyment. We do because we are unique in the fact that we can derive pleasure not simply from mere sensation but from the application of our intelligence to those pleasures of sensation in order to create a whole new higher level of pleasure. Mill says — on page 8 he says — right in the middle — he says, “There is no known epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and of the imagination, and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation.”

Now, there’s an obvious objection that arises at this point. Someone might say, “Well, this all sounds very ennobling. I’m glad that Mill thinks that people are capable of these sublime, highly elevated forms of happiness. The only problem that I have,” the objector might say, “is that I look around me and I don’t see too many people indulging in higher pleasures. I do see an awful lot of people watching trash television, consuming junk food at lightning speed, and in general fulfilling and satisfying every
physical sensory pleasure you can imagine without much involvement of any intelligence whatsoever.” I would be the first person to say this. I’ve not been overly impressed in my daily interactions with ordinary people with the level of — the types of pleasure that the average person seems to be going after. Isn’t the obvious reply to Mill saying, “Look. What you’ve just said is a very nice theory but no one actually does this or very few people actually do this. What you’re describing is the happiness of a very small number of people. The vast majority of people are people who enjoy the lower animal pleasures.”

Now, Mill here offers what I think is again a very clever and, I think, very perceptive response. It’s a classic false consciousness argument. What Mill says is this. He says, “Look. Every human being -- by virtue of the distinctive mental equipment that we have, every human being has the capacity to enjoy the higher pleasures. And if that capacity is tapped and if that capacity is fed and if that capacity is satisfied, a person will always choose the higher pleasure over the lower.” But that being said, many people may choose the lower pleasures because a) the capacity to enjoy the higher pleasures has never been cultivated. So think about a person who’s brought up by people who have no taste, who are a bunch of barbarians, right? In that child, the capacity to enjoy the higher pleasures will never be developed because the people who are responsible for raising him or her don’t have it themselves. So in such a case, a person would never develop the taste for better things.

Or a person may have had those capacities cultivated but they may have been either let go to waste, right? They’re not then later encouraged. Perhaps the person then finds — perhaps a person, let’s say, grew up in a very advanced home with parents who were very conscious to cultivate the capacity for higher levels of pleasure but that then, for some reason, the person wound up moving or living somewhere else in a very negative environment where, let’s say, they were constantly being bombarded
with base, crass sorts of enjoyments and never were allowed to exercise or fulfill their higher pleasures. One could easily see how for such a person their capacity for higher pleasure would eventually sort of die off.

So both neglect in childhood upbringing and coarseness of environment, of surroundings, both of these can kill the capacity for the higher pleasures. And this is why Mill says, on page 10 — towards the bottom, he says, “Capacity for nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed not only by hostile influences but by mere want of sustenance. And in the majority of young person, it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them and the society to which it has thrown them are not favorable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual taste because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them.”

And I think this is not only true. I mean, in my own experience teaching, I have found students who were clearly brought up in such a way that no one had ever exposed them to the better things in life. And the minute that they were exposed, they couldn’t get enough of the good things. So, I mean, this account of why people choose the lower pleasures in spite of the fact that human beings really find fulfillment in the higher pleasures — I think that this account is not only true in that it rings true to my ears and my experience with ordinary people, but also it includes a very, very important warning. That is we have to be as concerned with the cultural environment within which we live as we are with the physical environment.

Today we are awfully concerned with the physical environment, right? We don’t want — nobody should ever get a physical illness by way of environment. No one should ever smoke in proximity of a human being. I don’t need to sort of go on. These are all sort of the things that we obsess upon today. The physical environment, we’re very concerned about it because of our physical health and we all want to live to
But what Mill wants to say is, “Look. The cultural environment is equally important.” Because once you’ve insured your physical health, once you’re insured that you’re gonna stay alive and that all your senses are going to work properly, what are you gonna do with that physical life you have? What kind of pleasures are you going to pursue? What kind of aspirations are you going to have? Is there any point in living to 100 if the pleasures that you pursue are bestial, base, worthless pleasures? What’s the point of that? And so what Mill here reminds us of is that cultural environment is as potent a force for helping or harming us as physical environment and that we need to be equally concerned about both. And this strikes me as a very important point.

Okay. Next time we’re gonna go right into Mill’s moral philosophy. So now we’ve established his value system. His value system is essentially an Epicurean version of hedonism. We’ve offered a bunch of rationales on behalf of that value system and we’ve responded to some very obvious sorts of objections that might arise with respect to that value system. Now it’s time to talk about what Mill thinks about right and wrong. What is it that makes actions right, what is it that makes actions wrong. I want to leave you to think about a couple of things. First, explain why — can you explain why on Mill’s view a person’s intentions have nothing to do with the moral value of their actions? A) can you explain that, and b) what do you think of that? And I want you to start thinking about what you think are the morally relevant aspects of an action. Mill is gonna tell you what he thinks the morally relevant aspects are, Kant is gonna tell you what he thinks the morally relevant aspects are, but I want you to think about what you think the morally relevant aspects are.

And so we’ll pick it up next time with our second lecture on Mill. Once we’re done with Mill we’ll turn to Immanuel Kant. Thank you very much.