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Wisdom

John Stuart Mill's crisis: when a brilliant mind asked "would I be happy?"

An extraordinary education that began with Greek at three, the depression of 1826, Wordsworth's poetry and the lesson that happiness is not reached by pursuing it directly

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John Stuart Mill was born in London in 1806. His father, the philosopher and historian James Mill, decided to educate him himself, with an extraordinary programme. According to his Autobiography, Mill began Greek at three and Latin at eight. Before the age of 12 he had read classical authors, history and mathematics that many university students did not know. Then he studied logic and political economy.

The crisis

Mill grew up as a young reformer, dedicated to improving society according to the principles of utilitarianism: to bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But in the autumn of 1826, when he was 20, he fell into a deep state of sadness and emptiness.

In the Autobiography he tells how he asked himself a question: suppose all the reforms you are working for were achieved at once, would this be a great joy to you? And an irrepressible self-consciousness answered clearly: "No!" At that moment, he writes, the whole foundation on which he had built his life collapsed.

The way out

For months Mill went on working almost mechanically, telling no one. One day, reading the memoirs of the French writer Marmontel, he came to the passage where the author describes his father's death and his own new resolve to be everything to his family. Mill was moved to tears. He writes that he felt he was not "a stock or a stone", that he still had feelings. From that moment the burden began to lighten.

Later, the poetry of **William Wordsworth**, with its descriptions of nature and quiet feeling, became an important source of healing for him.

> *Mill wrote that those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness: on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit.*

Two lessons

From this experience Mill drew two conclusions that stayed with him all his life. The first: happiness is not reached by pursuing it directly. Ask yourself whether you are happy, he wrote, and you cease to be so. It comes "by the way", when we are absorbed in something meaningful. The second: reason is not enough. Feelings, art and poetry must be cultivated as much as the intellect.

Mill became one of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century. His work On Liberty (1859) remains a foundational text on individual freedom.

For today

1. **Achievements do not replace meaning.** You can have a lot and feel empty.
2. **Nourish the feelings too:** music, poetry, nature, relationships.
3. **If sadness lasts,** do not carry it alone as Mill did. Talk to someone, including a

professional.

Sources

Mill, J. S. (1873). *Autobiography*, chapter V. Project Gutenberg. gutenberg.org

Macleod, C. (2020). John Stuart Mill. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. plato.stanford.edu

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