

# introduction

## Biography: John Stuart Mill (1806–1873)

John Stuart Mill was born in London in 1806. His father, James Mill, was a philosopher, economist, and historian, who also held a prominent position in the East India Company. James Mill, along with Jeremy Bentham, was a founding father of a group known as the Philosophical Radicals, of which John Stuart Mill also became a prominent member. The group was known for its enthusiastic endorsement of utilitarianism as a moral and political philosophy, a philosophy they hoped would transform the political shape of the western world. James Mill played a critical role in the intellectual development of his eldest son, John Stuart Mill. John Stuart Mill was pushed very hard – he was taught Greek at the age of three and Latin at the age of eight. His studies in philosophy, economics, and politics, began early, and under the influence of both his father and Jeremy Bentham, Mill became a committed utilitarian determined to carry on the legacy of his teachers. The pressure of his education and of living up to his father’s intellectual expectations took its toll and Mill suffered a “mental crisis” in his early twenties. Mill himself credits his discovery of and interest in poetry, and in particular Wordsworth, with giving his life a kind of balance that made it richer and more fulfilling. Rather than continue a formal education, Mill followed his father in working for the East India Company from 1823 to 1858, a position that allowed him enough flexibility to pursue his intellectual writing.

While Mill is most famous for his more theoretical philosophical and political writings, he was also clearly interested in applying abstract principles. He wrote for the *London Review* which later became the *London and Westminster Review*, eventually becoming its editor. He also successfully ran as a Liberal for parliament in 1865 (representing Westminster and the ideas of the Philosophical Radicals until 1868). He was the Rector of St Andrews University in Scotland from 1865 to 1868. He took an active role in many political causes of his time including

the abolitionist and women's suffrage campaigns. Indeed he was the first in parliament to introduce a bill giving women the right to vote. Mill's economic writings advocated a system of workers' cooperatives to improve the condition of the working class.

The dominant (and domineering) influence in Mill's life was almost certainly his father, but Mill himself viewed Harriet Taylor as one of the most important figures in his intellectual development. Mill met Taylor when she was a married woman, and despite her marriage to another man, the two maintained an extraordinarily close relationship for over two decades. Though by almost all accounts the relationship was platonic, it was, nevertheless, highly controversial, straining relations even between Mill and his siblings. When Taylor's husband died, Mill and Taylor were finally able to marry in 1851. Mill viewed Taylor as a collaborator on some of his important work, and in particular with respect to *On Liberty* (published shortly after her death in 1858).

It is difficult to overstate Mill's influence on most of the major areas of philosophy, and in particular on moral, social, and political philosophy. His *On Liberty* remains one of the best-known and widely discussed defenses of liberalism. No discussion of liberty and its fundamental place in a legitimate society is complete without taking into account the views Mill defends in that work. *Utilitarianism* may be the most frequently assigned reading in any standard introductory course on ethics. While it is a defense of the view that the only thing desirable as an end is happiness, Mill makes clear that he is working with an extremely broad conception of pleasure or happiness, one reminiscent of Greek virtue ethics. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* was a work well ahead of its time and remains the classic statement of a liberal feminist philosophy. While Mill's writings on logic, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology are, perhaps, less influential today, at one time they too dominated the philosophical landscape. Mill's famous methods (called to this day Mill's Methods) to discover causal truth are still a standard part of many informal logic texts. And although it is not clear that Mill endorses the view sometimes attributed to him, his work in the philosophy of language, in particular his view of names, has enjoyed a bit of a renaissance with the advent of so-called direct theories of reference.

In many ways Mill represented the culmination of British empiricism. His *System of Logic* was widely used for a very long time, and it was far more than a book on logic. *A System of Logic* explores fundamental issues in the philosophy of language, the epistemology and metaphysics of causation, the way in which we expand knowledge through inference, and even the analysis of moral judgment. His *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, is anything but a mere critical examination of the view of another important philosopher. It is a systematic

attempt to work out the implications of a radical empiricism developed earlier by philosophers like George Berkeley and David Hume. In a way, Mill's work in this area provided a kind of bridge from the British empiricists to the twentieth-century positivists, and the fact that he was godfather to Bertrand Russell, one of the philosophical giants of the next century is, perhaps, a suitable metaphor for Mill's philosophical role. Mill died in Avignon, France, in 1873.

## Major Works

*A System of Logic*, 1843

*Principles of Political Economy*, 1848

*On Liberty*, 1859

*Utilitarianism*, 1861

*Considerations on Representative Government*, 1861

*An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 1865

*The Subjection of Women*, 1869

*Autobiography*, 1873

*Three Essays on Religion*, 1874

*The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 1963–91, general editor John M. Robson, contains 33 volumes of Mill's works. Volume 1 contains his literary essays, including "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties" (1833), and "Tennyson's Poems" (1835).

## Introduction to Part I, Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy

### Wendy Donner

John Stuart Mill was a formidable figure of the nineteenth century, a public intellectual, politician, and activist who made enduring contributions to moral, social, and political philosophy as well as to political life.

Mill's philosophy offers a rich, complex, and intriguing version of utilitarianism and liberalism. It is remarkably intricate. It is heavily influenced by and deeply linked to virtue ethics, and one of the aims of the chapters in Part I is to foreground and pay due respect to the elements of virtue ethics and politics in Mill's corpus. In Mill's theory the foundations remain utilitarian, for the development and exercise of the virtues provide the best chance of promoting happiness for all. But the characterization of human happiness is essentially interwoven with virtue. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote note that virtue ethics puts the focus on agents and their lives and character. They ask "is it possible for

utilitarians . . . to enlarge the focus of their own theories to incorporate agents' lives as a whole, their characters as well as . . . their actions" (Crisp and Slote 1997, 3). As I contend here, in the case of Mill's utilitarianism, the answer is clearly in the affirmative.

In *The Liberal Self* (Donner 1991), I offered a revisionary reading and defense of Mill's theory of value, including centrally his qualitative hedonism. In Chapter 2 I reassess and further defend Mill on this central component of his moral philosophy. The questions I explore in Chapter 2 include quantitative and qualitative hedonism, value pluralism, and virtue ethics. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill lays down the basic principle of his moral theory, the principle of utility, which "holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (CW 10:210).<sup>1</sup> In a consequentialist moral theory such as Mill's, the rightness and wrongness of acts are determined by their consequences, specifically, in the case of utilitarianism, the consequences that promote happiness or utility. Consequentialists look at whether actions produce good or bad results. Mill analyzes and unpacks good or value as happiness, and bad as unhappiness or suffering. Much of the exploration of Mill's concept of utility centers on examining his views on the nature of good, or what he means by happiness. Of central import also is his method for measuring good or happiness. His method relies upon the judgments of competent agents and one central focus of my examination is the analysis and exploration of what Mill means by a competent agent. Mill's notion of a competent agent is one who has undergone an education best understood as a process of development and self-development. Mill's characterization of competent agency features his indebtedness to virtue ethics.

I examine and defend Mill's value theory in part by comparing it with the quantitative hedonism of Jeremy Bentham, Mill's utilitarian predecessor. Hedonism maintains that the only things that are good intrinsically are pleasurable or happy states of experience. This statement leaves open the question of what properties of valuable states of experience contribute to their value. Bentham contends that only the quantity of happiness produces its value, while Mill counters that the quality or kind of happiness also counts in assessing its value. Mill maintains that the forms of happiness that are the most valuable are those that develop and exercise the higher human capacities and excellences. This claim explicitly ties Mill's theory in with the lineage of virtue ethics, which makes the exercise of the human excellences or virtues a focal point of ethics and politics. The chapter also takes up objections to hedonism. Some objections claim that it is inconsistent with hedonism to include the quality of pleasures in the assessment of value. Other objections come from external challenges. Value pluralists, for example, reject the notion that only happiness is intrinsically good and argue that other things like

virtue, knowledge, and love can be considered as valuable in themselves, apart from any essential relation to happiness.

In Chapter 3 I consider core issues about Mill's views on right or obligation and the status of moral rules. I consider whether Mill's theory is best classified as act- or rule-utilitarianism and explore the difficulties confronting any attempt to firmly locate him in either category. The dispute over act- versus rule-utilitarianism concerns whether the principle of utility should be understood as assessing particular actions on a case-by-case basis or as assessing which moral rules are the most generally beneficial in producing good consequences. I explore the objection that the principle of utility is in conflict with the demands of justice. In responding to this objection I examine the relation between utility and justice in the architecture of Mill's theory, as well as the central place of rights grounded in utility in his system. I argue that awareness of the structure of Mill's theory is an indispensable tool for discerning his intentions. The foundation of Mill's theoretical structure is the Art of Life, which delineates the proper domain of Morality in its relations with companion spheres of Prudence or Policy and Virtue or Aesthetics. We need to understand the *scope* of Morality, as well as the place of rules of obligation and rights within the *structure* of his moral and practical philosophy before we can reasonably approach the question of the status of rules of obligation and principles of justice.

Chapter 4 is on liberty. Mill's famous liberty principle in *On Liberty* claims that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection" (CW 8:223). Liberty can be interfered with only to prevent harm to others. This classic statement raises an array of questions. What is the extent of the legitimate power which state and society may exercise over members of society? How is harm to others to be construed so as to set clear boundaries to the limits of social coercion to effectively protect vital interests and rights to liberty of speech, action, individuality, and self-development? Things fall into place, I argue, if we draw upon the structure of Mill's theory as set down in Chapter 3 and recognize that the liberty principle is a principle of justice, with the mandate of protecting the most vital human interests from the harms of incursions of compulsion and control. Mill invokes a basic distinction between liberty, which is a bedrock liberal value, and power, which is a harmful fuel for oppression and despotism. Mill's liberalism endorses liberty while rejecting despotic tendencies to gain control and power over others. This distinction runs as a bright line throughout his philosophy. I highlight the centrality of the right to liberty of self-development. I explore the importance of liberty in some of its most important manifestations such as freedom of thought and expression, autonomy, and individuality. His models of public deliberation and freedom of speech

and action are particularly well suited to diverse and pluralistic societies and present an ideal of human moral and social progress. I scrutinize Mill's own example of polygamous marriage within Mormon communities of his time, in order to test the limits of application of the liberty principle. The case serves as an entry to look at some of the tensions raised by the need to balance individuality and community.

Chapter 5 brings together the commitments of utilitarianism and virtue ethics and of liberal egalitarianism in Mill's philosophy of education. Historical liberals like Mill place a great deal of importance on the education of members of society. In Mill's system, education is one of the primary moral arts, paired with the moral science of ethology (the science of character formation). In his liberal political philosophy, education is construed very broadly, as the art of character formation, and its ideals and goals then become the proper socialization of the members of society, both children and adults. Mill devotes many writings to an examination of appropriate education seen as processes of development and self-development of distinctive human capacities and excellences. Humans are deprived of the opportunity to lead the happiest lives unless they are afforded the opportunity to develop and use these capacities. To be a "competent agent" is Mill's shorthand for being an agent who has had the opportunity to undergo a process of development in childhood and self-development in adulthood. To be self-developed is both an essential element of and a precondition for appreciating the most valuable kinds of happiness. Thus we are entitled and have a right, founded on a vital interest, to be so educated in childhood (if we are born into a society with the means), and to reach at least a threshold level of self-development in adulthood. These capacities that make up self-development combine appropriate balances of autonomy and individuality and compassion, caring and social cooperation. This conception is fully in harmony with and resonant with conceptions of character in virtue ethics. The same abilities are needed to engage as responsible citizens in the public realm to cooperate and to promote the common good.

Chapter 6 is devoted to some core issues of Mill's political philosophy, namely, his liberalism and egalitarianism and applications to his vision of representative government and political and economic democracy. The discussion of education paves the way for an examination of the potentials and dilemmas of egalitarian liberalism. Contemporary liberal theorists such as Amy Gutmann engage with liberal conceptions of democracy that harmonize with the goals of education for democracy. Gutmann says "like democratic education, democracy is a political *ideal* – of a society whose adult members are, and continue to be, equipped by their education and authorized by political structures to share in ruling" (Gutmann 1987, xi). Mill's liberalism provides a framework for approaching issues such as appropriate democratic education and it is

particularly well suited to contemporary multicultural and pluralistic societies. His commitment to active participatory democracy is another example of pursuing avenues for the practice of the virtues in the public domain that is linked to virtue theories. Mill's theory propounds a vision of deliberative, participatory democratic politics that is as radical today as it was in his time.

Mill's bold hopes for the prospects of liberal education for democratic practice and progress have faced objections about the limitations of his liberalism's capacity to address problems of inequality and elitism. I explore tensions between the elitist and the egalitarian strands of Mill's philosophy, and offer arguments that the egalitarian commitments are more fundamental and prevalent. The right to liberty of self-development is the right to have one's capacities and faculties developed in childhood so that one is able to carry on the process of self-development once adulthood is reached. This is a basic right since the development of these capacities is a precondition for engaging in and appreciating the moral and intellectual virtues, or the kinds of pleasures that are deemed most valuable, in adulthood. This central notion is the seed for some of the response to these objections. Mill's extensive writings examining the democratic and educative potential of social, political, and economic institutions are guided by these commitments. Mill argues for participatory and democratic workplace partnerships and associations and hoped that this would bring about "the conversion of each human being's daily occupation into a school of the social sympathies and the practical intelligence" (CW 3:792).

In Chapter 7 this spirit is carried through in Mill's classic liberal feminism and arguments for sexual equality. In *The Subjection of Women* Mill promotes a liberal feminist argument for equality and claims that the family should be "a school of sympathy in equality, of living together in love, without power on one side or obedience on the other" (CW 21:295). His theory is defended by some for its groundbreaking insights on the path to equality between men and women and his clear understanding of the brutal effects of oppressive power and domestic violence. Mill is a classic proponent of liberal feminism, both in theory and in activist practice. I examine some details of his analysis, including his dissection of the brutality of domestic violence, his insights into the corrosive effects of patriarchal oppression upon women's happiness and liberty, and his analysis of how the subtler forms of this induce compliance without resort to violence. This stance has drawn its share of criticism from some contemporary feminist philosophers who see in Mill's work what they contend are the flaws of a liberal feminist framework writ large. I examine the objection that Mill's defense of gendered division of labor indicates that his goal is to mitigate rather than eliminate patriarchy.

In Chapter 8 I explore Mill's contribution to environmental philosophy. Mill is often cited in discussions of environmental ethics as an historical friend of sustainable development in his advocacy of the stationary state in economics and his opposition to the desirability of permanent economic growth. This progressive stance must be considered in balance with his expressed views in the essay "Nature" where he calls for moderate human interventions in nature to improve human prospects. His perspective on the environment is not as widely discussed in treatments of his own moral and political theory. I explore his value theory and how it fits in with the commitments of contemporary radical environmentalists who defend non-anthropocentric theories. I examine how his value theory serves as a foundation for a stance on appropriate appreciation of nature which goes part of the way with radical environmentalism. Finally, I see how his connections with Romanticism underscore this appreciation of wilderness and nature.

## Introduction to Part II, Mill's Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology

**Richard Fumerton**

In his lifetime, Mill's philosophical influence in logic, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology was perhaps almost as significant as his influence in ethics and political philosophy. It cannot, however, be plausibly claimed that his work in the former fields had the same lasting importance. His colossal *A System of Logic*, was a work not only in logic but also in philosophy of science, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology. It contains, however, at least some views that are simply outdated. Formal logic is one of the (perhaps relatively few) areas of philosophy in which it seems uncontroversial that huge advances have been made since the time Mill wrote. Similarly, in the philosophy of language, distinctions have been made that render more perspicuous the terms of various debates, even as the debates rage on. In *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, Mill's heroic efforts at reducing meaningful discourse to claims that are experientially verifiable through straightforward enumerative induction have largely been rejected, both in detail and in theory (though there are a few of us still sympathetic to the theory). Nor can one even say that Mill was always the most original of thinkers in these fields. Many of his ideas had their seeds in earlier British empiricists such as Berkeley and Hume.

Even if the above claims are true, however, we should not underestimate Mill's importance in the development of philosophy. As I argue later, Mill's work was very much the *culmination* of British empiricism. If Mill

was undeniably heavily influenced by the views of earlier empiricists, he developed those views in the kind of detail that allows subsequent generations of philosophers to see more clearly their implications. As a result the philosophical community was much better positioned to evaluate those views. Mill's conception of matter, for example, as the permanent possibility of sensation was one of the inspirations for positivist reductions of the early twentieth century. However short-lived it was, positivism in its heyday owed a great debt to John Stuart Mill. And even after the more extreme versions of positivism were largely rejected, Mill's suspicions concerning an intuitionist metaphysics and his emphasis on grounding justified belief in empirical evidence have an influence that is still profound.

In my discussion of Mill's logic, metaphysics, and epistemology, I could not do justice to the intricacies of Mill's many views and arguments. I tried instead to give the reader a feel for what I take to be the *heart* of Mill's philosophy. I tried to work almost exclusively with primary texts, and to carve out of those texts the conclusions that I think Mill was most interested in defending. The interpretation of Mill is nowhere near as straightforward as my prose might sometimes imply. Reasonable philosophers might disagree on how to understand any number of theses I attribute to him.

As I suggested above, I don't think that it is possible to understand and appreciate Mill without seeing his work against the backdrop of earlier empiricism. With that in mind, in Chapter 9, I try to describe the metaphysical and epistemological tenets of British empiricism that so dominated Mill's conception of the problems that needed to be addressed. In particular, I set out in some detail the threat of skepticism that so concerned philosophers like Berkeley and Hume.

In Chapter 10, I try to make explicit the epistemological presuppositions of Mill's own brand of empiricism, beginning with some perhaps surprising and potentially significant observations about Mill's willingness to allow into the foundation of empirical knowledge either truths about past experience or truths about probabilistic connections between present apparent memories and past experiences. Mill's liberal attitude towards incorporating non-inductively based knowledge of the past certainly didn't expand to knowledge of the external world. Mill was squarely in the empiricist camp that limited direct empirical knowledge to the phenomenally given character of subjective and fleeting sensation. Unlike Berkeley who tried to combine that view with an idealism that reduced objects to bundles of actual ideas (either in the minds of humans or in the mind of God), or Hume, who seemed resigned to a radical skepticism concerning belief in an external world, Mill argued that we can find a way of understanding physical objects that will avoid skepticism. He argued that our thought about external reality is just

thought about the “permanent possibilities of sensations.” Mill’s view was a rough forerunner of the phenomenalism defended by some positivists of the twentieth century. As a solution to the epistemological problem of justifying belief in external reality, it is no more plausible than the reduction of physical objects to permanent possibilities of sensation, a view I discuss in more detail in Chapter 11.

In Chapter 10, I group together the examination of Mill’s views on logic and his views on epistemology because I think that for Mill himself the two fields are intimately connected. Mill makes some truly startling claims about the subordination of deductive to inductive reasoning. One of these claims concerns the status of mathematical knowledge. Mill is one of very few philosophers who seem willing to claim that even simple arithmetical truths like  $2 + 2 = 4$  are only inductively supported, an idiosyncratic claim that I critically evaluate.

Mill is so taken with the fundamental place of inductive reasoning that, on one natural reading, he even seems to claim that all *genuine* reasoning is properly viewed as inductive. While in one sense the claim is patently false, it becomes more understandable when interpreted as an *epistemological* claim. His idea, I argue, is that deductively valid syllogistic reasoning often masks the underlying inferences involved in justifying a belief. Because inductive reasoning is so pivotal to Mill’s understanding of epistemic justification, I devote one section of Chapter 10 to his discussion of the justifying ground of our employment of induction.

No discussion of Mill is complete without a discussion of his famous methods for discovering causal connections, and I follow an examination of Mill’s more abstract views on induction with an examination of these more applied epistemological principles.

In Chapter 11, I turn to Mill’s views in metaphysics, construing the field broadly so that it includes his views about the way in which language represents the world. Again, I argue that it is not really possible to understand Mill’s metaphysics without understanding his radical empiricism, a radical empiricism driven by the firm conviction that we must rely on empirical foundations consisting of direct apprehension of the “phenomenally given.” The problem is how to avoid skepticism within such a framework. As I indicated above, Mill’s solution to the problem of perception critically involves a claim about how to understand the content of claims about the physical world. To successfully reduce talk of physical objects to talk about the permanent possibility of sensations, we must not allow the language of physical objects to creep into our characterization of permanent possibilities of sensations. It is an understatement to suggest that succeeding in this task is an uphill battle.

Just as Mill’s views on the metaphysics and epistemology of perception are intimately connected, so also his views on the metaphysics and

epistemology of causation are intertwined. In Chapter 11, I give a brief critical evaluation of Mill's metaphysical account of causation.

As was briefly indicated above, there has been something of a resurgence of interest in Mill's views in the philosophy of language, largely due to passages in *A System of Logic* in which he appears to endorse the now somewhat fashionable direct reference theory for names. While I don't even try to do justice to the intricacies of the many distinctions Mill makes concerning meaning and reference, I do suggest that one ought to move slowly before embracing Mill as a forerunner of contemporary direct reference theorists.

I conclude my discussion of Mill's metaphysics by returning to the topic of ethical judgments. Mill was obviously fundamentally interested in ethical theorizing. But for a philosopher who was clearly concerned with careful analysis of the concept of other sorts of claims (such as claims about the physical world), Mill's ethical writing is surprisingly free of straightforward meta-ethical discussion of the *content* of moral claims. There are, I argue, hints of a view about the meaning of ethical statements in utilitarianism, but there are also some surprising passages, usually overlooked, in *A System of Logic* that bear on the interpretation of Mill's implicit commitments in this area. In what might well seem like fairly wild speculation, I suggest a reason that Mill might want to have kept in the background his considered view on this matter.

## note

- 1 All page references to Mill's writings in Part I are to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–91). Hereafter *Collected Works*, cited as CW.

