

JOHN STUART MILL AND LIBERTY

The leading philosopher of mid-Victorian England, John Stuart Mill (1806–73), claimed an “ability and willingness to learn from everybody.” This was not necessarily a celebrated man’s ritual, if becoming, modesty. In Mill’s mind, the ideas of earlier thinkers—e.g., John Locke, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, his own father James Mill—were transformed over the years into classical liberalism, the idea that society is best served by maximum personal freedoms and minimal government. Recent scholarship, as Maurice Cranston relates, has provided new insight into the life of the philosopher who may have learned “from everybody,” but was driven to heed some more than others.

by Maurice Cranston

John Stuart Mill has held the attention of the reading public of the Western world longer than any other 19th-century philosopher, with the notable exception of Karl Marx.

Each man is known as theorist of one central idea. Marx is read by his admirers as a champion of equality. Mill is read for his words on liberty, words that have contributed much to the debates of our own time about the freedom of dissenters, minorities, and women. He was always controversial. William Gladstone, the great Liberal Party leader, disapproved of Mill’s ideas, and refused to attend his funeral. Yet he called him “the Saint of Rationalism.”

John Stuart Mill was born in his father’s comfortable London home in 1806, a time when the Industrial Revolution was already beginning to transform England into a prospering urban nation with a rising middle class, whose leaders’ concerns included how to govern and “improve” such a rapidly changing society. James Mill, a strict disciplinarian who had risen from humble origins to become a senior civil servant with the East India Company, was by then a noted historian, economist, and philosopher. He was an advocate of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, which held that all issues of right and wrong



Mill, circa 1860, and Harriet Taylor. The English, he lamented, set "some value" on liberty, yet found the "idea of equality" so "strange."

could be settled by measuring the amount of pleasure or pain that might be caused by any private action or public policy.

James Mill did not send his eldest child to any school; he taught him at home following a strenuous plan of education devised by himself and Bentham to produce the perfect utilitarian. John learned both Greek and Latin before he was nine years old. Religion was excluded from his upbringing.

Mill's education was completed early—and early, too, appeared his oddly coexisting streaks of conformism and rigorous independence. At age 17, he was earning his living as a clerk in the India Office where his father worked. During that year he published his first article—in *The Westminster Review*, the leading English literary journal—and also made his debut as a radical reformer, spending two nights in jail for distributing pamphlets recommending contraceptive techniques as a solution to the problem of poverty in Britain.

At age 20—as he recalled in his *Autobiography*, published after his death in 1873—Mill suffered a depression, from which he recovered by reading poetry. Through Wordsworth and others he discovered romanticism, which challenged the rationalistic philosophy that had been so carefully inculcated in him. "I did not lose . . . sight," he wrote, of "that part of the truth which I had seen before." But "I thought that it had consequences which required to be corrected, by

joining other kinds of cultivation with it.”

Mill aimed at working out a new system of philosophy combining the virtues of rationalism with those of romanticism. But how to reconcile two schools of seemingly opposed thought? The rational solution, Mill decided, could only be to revise logic itself. Mill's chief contribution to this endeavor was his *System of Logic* (1843), which he began at age 24. That it took him 13 years to finish the work was closely related to Mill's less than rational personal life.

Mill was afflicted by a deep sense of loneliness. Once, at the age of 23, he wrote to a friend of his longing for a “perfect friendship.” Soon after he started on his *Logic* essay, Mill met a handsome, intelligent, and imperious young woman named Harriet Taylor. He fell in love with her, and she with him. But Harriet happened to be married—to John Taylor, a prosperous wholesale druggist with a house in London and a country place. She was also the mother of two small children (soon to be joined by a third).

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Even so, during the 19 years before the druggist's death in 1849 enabled them to marry, she and Mill kept constant company.

Alternately reckless and furtive, they behaved as if they were lovers, something they always denied. And yet it was a strangely guilt-ridden relationship. Harriet set up house on her own in rural Blackheath and traveled on the Continent with Mill. They remained, in Harriet's word, *Seelenfreunden* (“soul mates”), because, Mill said, they did not wish to hurt her husband. Mill seems not to have guessed that Mr. Taylor might be as much wounded by the appearance of adultery as by its reality. Nevertheless, Mill, in nervous anger, broke with both his friends and his relatives to lead a rather solitary life with Harriet at Blackheath.

Her hold over his thinking was considerable. If her situation with Mill was a “romantic” one, a triumph of love over convention, her views were not Wordsworthian at all. They were closer to those of the Enlightenment—rationalistic, utilitarian, and radical. Hence, paradoxically, she reinforced on Mill the influence of his father, and not that of the poets.

One example of her influence on Mill is his *Principles of Political Economy*, a long and not conspicuously original book, which debuted in 1848 when Mill was 42. It was originally dedicated to “Mrs. John Taylor,” from whom, Mill wrote, he first grasped many of the book's ideas. After John Taylor's death, and their marriage nearly two years

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later in 1851, Mill took to describing each of his works as a "joint-production" with Harriet. He even spoke of his wife as "the inspirer, and in part the author, of all that is best in my writings." Mill's contemporaries took these tributes as polite hyperbole, but recent scholarship on his manuscripts confirms her larger role.

For instance, in the first edition of *Political Economy*, Mill accepted David Ricardo's theory of value, which focuses on the amount of labor invested in the manufacture of a product. Mill also accepted the Malthusian doctrine that any improvement in the condition of the poor will be negated by the growth of population (although Mill's remedy for overpopulation is not Thomas Malthus's "moral restraint," but contraceptive devices). And Mill endorsed Adam Smith's teaching against the state's intervention in the nation's economic life, arguing that England was already sufficiently burdened with taxes. Economic well-being, he said, required the spur of competition.

When, within a year, a second edition appeared, an essential part of the thesis was reversed. Harriet, who had been won over to the Left by the antimonarchical revolts that shook France and other Continental countries in 1848, pressed Mill to delete criticisms of socialism and communism. Thus, Mill first dismissed proposals for communal property ownership as "almost too chimerical to be reasoned with." In the new edition, these ideas became "the most valuable elements of human improvement now existing."

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Harriet's influence is most significant in Mill's best-known work, *On Liberty*, published in 1859, not long after her death. It is not simply a defense of freedom in the liberal tradition of John Milton and John Locke; it outlines a conception that differs with their ideas, and, strikingly, with Mill's other writings.

For example, Mill described *On Liberty* as a "kind of philosophic textbook of a single truth." This truth was 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." Elsewhere, Mill attacked the notion of building on a "single truth" in politics; he had criticized the French philosopher Auguste Comte for seeing only one point of view "when there are many others equally essential."

In a later work, *Utilitarianism* (1863), his best-known work on ethics, Mill saw liberty as a part of man's "social state," at once "so natural, so necessary, and so habitual to man, that [except at rare times] he never conceives himself otherwise than as a member of a body." In *On Liberty*, society is the enemy.

The essay is very much a plea for something that both Mill and Harriet felt strongly about: the freedom of the isolated person stand-

ing outside of and apart from the social body. Whereas earlier liberal philosophers, such as John Locke, had depicted freedom as something to be secured against the constraints of governments or the state, Mill represents freedom as something to be secured primarily against the constraints of other people. Mill does not say much about political rulers; he dwells on the domination of the individual by unwritten laws, conventional ideas, social rules, and public opinion. "When society is itself the tyrant"—over the individuals it comprises—its tyranny is worse than "many kinds of political oppression." A need exists for protection against society's tendency to impose, "by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them."

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We need to remember that Mill wrote *On Liberty* at a time and place when the constraints of the state were few and those of society were many, and, often, onerous. Victorian England was not the land of the despotic Stuart kings, where the liberty Locke pleaded for was mainly a right endangered by political interference. Mill's Victorian contemporaries were seldom oppressed by government, which was minimal (the 1851 census counted fewer than 75,000 public employees, compared with 932,000 in France in 1846). But nearly all individuals were constantly pressured by neighbors, employers, husbands, and fathers, who were dominated in turn by taboos and conventions governing a host of matters—courtship, dress, recreation, use of the Sabbath, and much else.

If Mill felt these constraints keenly, and Harriet even more so, he took care in presenting his case, so it should not seem to be the romantic protest of an alienated individual against a bourgeois environment. He argued as coldly and logically as possible.

There are, he suggested, three possibilities to consider when deciding if men should have freedom of opinion and expression. First, the opinion in question may be true, in which case it is plainly right that it should be published. Second, the opinion may be false; it would still be good for it to be published, because truth gains vigor from being challenged and vindicated. (A true belief that is never challenged becomes a dead maxim, which everyone repeats and nobody thinks about.) Third, the opinion may be partly true and partly false. Again Mill argued for expression, on the ground that the exercise of disentangling the false from the true would help to correct errors.

Since these exhaust the possibilities, Mill concluded, it must always be right to grant liberty of opinion and expression.

"If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion," Mill wrote, "mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the

power, would be justified in silencing mankind." The "peculiar evil" of silencing one opinion is that it robs "the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it."

Discussing freedom of action, Mill staked out even more dangerous ground, again under Harriet's sway. Mill rejected the Christian teaching that men are born in sin and that the self must be denied. He asserted his belief in the goodness—and the *potential* goodness—of man. While he conceded that there was sometimes a need for self-denial in putting public happiness before private happiness, Mill emphasized the value of self-expression. Far from accepting the doctrine of the depravity of man, he suggested that it is chiefly through the cultivation of their individuality that "human beings"—and it is to be noted that he uses that term rather than "men"—become "noble and beautiful object[s] of contemplation."

He pleaded for personality, variety, even eccentricity. "In this age the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service." Eccentricity rises where "strength of character" abounds. "The amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour and moral courage which it contains."

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Yet Mill was not advocating unbridled self-expression, or unlimited freedom. Indeed, he said at the beginning of *On Liberty* that his task was to set out exactly what the limits of freedom were. His conclusion: One man's right to liberty of action stops at the point where it might injure or curb the freedom of another man. "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." Otherwise every adult should be allowed to do as he likes.

But supposing, the critic might ask, that what a man likes to do is wrong? Surely he should not then be allowed to do it? Surely the important thing is not that men should do what they want to do but what they *ought* to do? And might it not be the duty of society to help men do what they ought to do?

Mill did not shirk these questions. Take alcoholism, for instance.

Britain's 19th-century prohibitionists viewed drunkenness as a social evil, which could be remedied by enforced abstinence. Mill denied that prohibition would uphold morality. If there was no temptation to overcome, he pleaded, there would be no virtue in overcoming temptation. Morality lies in choosing the better and rejecting the worse. No option, no morality. There would be no scope for character development in a society that closed its bars and brothels, making vice impossible. Mill did not deny that drink did harm. Yet his remedy

was not to curb liberty, but to promote responsible behavior by spreading enlightenment.

It may be that Mill was too optimistic about the power of enlightenment to educate people, too confident about the capacity of men to better themselves morally. And yet, one must not overstate his optimism. His concern for freedom for self-improvement was essentially a concern for those individuals who *chose* to improve themselves. He did not think that the majority had yet developed that capacity. This was why the majority was, in his eyes, the chief enemy of the individual's liberty.

Mill was a liberal, but not a democrat.

Of all tyrannies, he dreaded most the "tyranny of the majority." When Mill thought of freedom, he had in mind the rights of minorities—for example, Irish Catholics, West Indian blacks, and, above all, the minority that was a numerical majority, women. In two tracts, *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869), he made a remarkable contribution to the literature of feminism, though neither essay had much impact until years later.

Harriet surely inspired these writings. But what is singular about them is that they do not demand, in the manner of most feminist writing, equality for women. Rather, Mill argues for the *liberty* of women, which is linked with the liberty of men. He does not urge that women should be freed from the domination of men, but that women as well as men should be freed from the rule of custom, habit, and tradition, which holds both sexes in bondage.

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"Women's rights" are claimed—for instance, the right to own property or to vote in parliamentary elections. Yet these are not claimed as natural rights or ends in themselves, but as elements of a wider program of human emancipation, in which women's interests are seen as identical to men's. In *Considerations On Representative Government* (1861), Mill rejected the idea of "Mr. [John] Bright and his school of democrats" that a vote was any man's or woman's right. A vote, Mill argued, was a trust. It should be exercised only by responsible people, male or female. Mill recommended that educated persons be allowed plural votes, to give their voice the added weight it deserved. He suggested that proportional representation be introduced into parliamentary elections, not because it was more democratic, but to provide better for the representation of minorities.

Mill believed that the day would come when the demand for universal suffrage would prove irresistible. The answer, he thought, would be to reform the tax system so that "every grown person in the community" should become a taxpayer. He did not want a system of voting "like that of New York," which enabled people who paid no

taxes to vote for levies on people who did.*

Mill also urged preparation for universal suffrage via immediate universal education. His belief in the saving powers of enlightenment led him to favor the enlargement of the state's powers to counteract the pressures of society. He agreed that the state had the right to interfere with the freedom of the family in forcing children to go to school. Since children are excluded from the class of people for whom freedom is demanded in *On Liberty*, his proposal for compulsory education (which began, at the primary level, in 1880) is not, in itself, inconsistent with his principles. But his plea for the control of marriage and childbearing cannot escape that criticism. He asks not only for laws that would "forbid marriage unless the parties can show that they have the means for supporting a family," he also invites society to step in where the laws are ineffective, so that an improvident marriage shall become a subject of social stigma.

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It was precisely because Mill set such a high value on intellectual and general culture that he mistrusted those who lacked it. He scorned the proletariat. The English working classes, he wrote, "are in conduct the most disorderly, debauched, and unruly, and least respectable and trustworthy of any nation whatsoever." He was, therefore, anxious to ensure that universal suffrage did not raise the status of the people in any more than a nominal sense. "The people ought to be the masters," he wrote, "but they are masters who must employ servants more skilful than themselves." He even proposed that institutions be set up to ensure a "standing opposition to the will of the majority."

Mill detested the idea of the nation being ruled by nobles or by the rich. But he did favor rule by another elite—professional administrators, civil servants, and bureaucrats like himself and his colleagues at the India Office, who were responsible for governing millions on the subcontinent.

"There is a radical difference," he wrote, "between controlling the business of government and actually doing it." He wanted the controlling to be done by Parliament and a representative body of taxpayers, and the actual governing to be done by specialists, with a "commission of legislation" (also composed of specialists) to draft measures on which Parliament would be invited to vote.

Ordinary people "do not need political rights in order that they

*Various qualifications (e.g., property ownership, taxpayer status) kept British voter rolls low during the 19th century. Mill, as a Liberal M.P., tried but failed to amend the Reform Bill of 1867 to allow women to vote in national elections. In 1918, Parliament enfranchised all men over age 21 and women over 30 who could (or had husbands who could) vote in local elections. Women were finally welcomed at the polls on the same terms as men only in 1928—nine years after U.S. women got the vote, 16 years before French women did.

may govern, but in order that they may not be misgoverned.”

When Harriet died in 1858, at Avignon, France, Mill wrote to Louis Blanc, the French socialist, that England had lost its “greatest mind.” Mill’s grief was intense, but short-lived. His health, frail throughout his years with Harriet, improved. During their seven years of marriage, he had published little. He emerged from his long seclusion, during which he had earned the reputation of a misanthrope, to become a popular figure in London intellectual society.

In 1865, at age 59, Mill was invited to stand for Parliament as a Liberal Party candidate in London’s Westminster district. He said he would do so if it was understood that his only object in the House of Commons would be to promote the ideas expressed in his writings and that no further pledges were demanded of him.

As a campaigner, Mill did not promise to be a crowd-pleaser. At one of his election meetings, the novelist Thomas Hardy—a distant relation of Harriet’s—described him standing “bareheaded,” with “his vast pale brow, so thin-skinned as to show the blue veins, sloped back like a stretching upland,” conveying “to the observer a curious sense of perilous exposure.”

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Yet Mill had blunt-spoken charm. Once he held a meeting for working people—who had no vote, but, Mill thought, possessed as much right as the middle classes to see and hear their representative. Mill’s foes exhumed all the harsh words he had ever written about the proletariat. A man carrying a placard saying that the lower classes, “though mostly habitual liars, are ashamed of lying,” asked Mill if he had written those words. Said Mill: “I did.” After a pause, the workers cheered. Their leader told Mill that they appreciated his candor. Mill soon found he had more power to sway such a crowd than any other Liberal M.P. except William Gladstone.

In his *Autobiography*, Mill recalls the time when a Tory government sent police to break up a meeting of workingmen in Hyde Park. The men, says Mill, “showed a determination to make another attempt at meeting in the Park, to which many of them would probably have come armed; the Government made military preparations to resist the attempt, and something very serious seemed impending.” Mill decided to address the workers’ meeting. “I told them that a proceeding which would certainly produce a collision with the military could only be justifiable on two conditions; if the position of affairs had become such that a revolution was desirable, and if they thought themselves able to accomplish one. To this argument, after considerable discussion, they at last yielded.”

In Parliament, Mill upheld workers’ right of assembly and backed working-class candidates. In general, Mill argued for progres-

sive causes in the Commons. He tried to save the lives of some Irish nationalists condemned for fomenting rebellion. He led a campaign against Governor Edward Eyre of Jamaica, who had arrested and hanged more than 30 black rebels. He fought for prostitutes' civil liberties, imperiled by a Contagious Diseases Act, and gave speeches (invariably to a derisive audience) in favor of women's suffrage.

But Mill was not always progressive. He distanced himself from the men he called "philanthropists" on, for instance, the abolition of capital punishment. In 1868, he spoke in the Commons for retention of the death penalty for murder, with his arguments drawn from his utilitarian theory of morals.

The threat of death, he said, was uniquely powerful as a deterrent, more likely than any other form of punishment to diminish the number of murders. Since the general goal of public policy should be to minimize pain, such deterrence should be paramount. Second, Mill argued that a quick death on the gallows was less painful in fact than a lingering death in prison (even though the fear of such a death had a greater power to deter criminals); execution was thus less cruel than life imprisonment. Mill did not imagine that even the "philanthropists" would be so foolish as to advocate any punishment for murder less severe than a life sentence without parole.

Mill's support for capital punishment was popular, but some of his other views were too advanced for even Westminster's enlightened 19th-century bourgeoisie. His support for contraception and divorce, his association with union leaders, and above all his feminism, cost him re-election in 1868. When he lost his Commons seat, he went to Avignon; there, near the cemetery where Harriet was buried, he bought a house, which he furnished with items from the hotel room in which she had died.

Five years later, at age 66, Mill died at Avignon.

Before he left London, Mill had become a close friend of a fellow parliamentarian, Viscount Amberley, who shared his ideas and continued to champion them. Shortly before he died, Mill became the agnostic's equivalent of a godfather to the Amberleys' infant son. Said Lady Amberley: "There is no one in whose steps I would rather see a boy of mine following." The child's name was Bertrand Russell.