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Title

Mill, John Stuart

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Main Text

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) is widely regarded as the leading English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century. His contributions ranged over epistemology, scientific method, the social sciences, metaphysics, philosophy of language, and moral and political philosophy. His great systematic treatises, *A System of Logic* (1843) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) were standard textbooks for decades. But his most enduring works—*On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1861), and *The Subjection of Women* (1869)—all concern moral and political philosophy. In those fields, he is recognized as the leading expositor and defender of the utilitarian theory of morality and a core figure of the liberal political tradition. Mill was also a social and political activist, a civil servant in the East India Company, and briefly a member of the British parliament, where he is remembered as the first person to introduce legislation to grant women

the right to vote. He remains a key inspiration and touchstone for contemporary moral and political theory.

Mill followed Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and his father James Mill (1773-1836) as a proponent of utilitarianism. They argued that morality requires a public standard to replace appeals to intuition that merely reflect people's likes and dislikes. Their proposal, the "Greatest Happiness Principle" (CW X.214), holds that the fundamental standard of right and wrong actions, rules, policies, or institutions is their contribution to the general happiness, that is, to the overall balance of pleasure and pain. As a form of consequentialism, utilitarians hold that moral evaluation is solely a matter of the value produced by performing some action or enacting some policy. Utilitarians then argue that what is ultimately of value is happiness. Bentham and Mill emphasized that each person's happiness is to count equally or impartially, and that the suffering of non-human animals should also be taken into account.

Mill revised Bentham's utilitarianism primarily by emphasizing that character development was itself a means to promoting utility. Bentham had focused on institutional structures to incentivize people to produce good outcomes. Mill argued instead that people were capable of developing a sense of duty or fellow-feeling, that the cultivation of the intellect and the sentiments were themselves important elements of individual happiness, and that happiness should not be confused with mere contentment or preference satisfaction.

The focus on character also informed Mill's liberal political philosophy. In *On Liberty*, he argued that principled limits on state and social authorities, even in a democracy, were vital for the development of what he called "individuality" (CW XVIII.260) or self-determination. He maintained the importance of diverse "experiments in living" (CW XVIII.281) not only for individual happiness but as a means to social progress. Despotism, even of a majority, is

incompatible with the discussion and experience that provide the rational basis for improvement. His defense of freedom of discussion in *On Liberty*—that it is always better to allow people to raise contrary viewpoints in a sincere and truth-oriented spirit than to stifle dissent—remains one of the most important essays on that topic. Mill also articulated what is now commonly referred to as the harm principle or liberty principle, the core idea of which is that an individual's actions (or the actions of consenting adults) that do not risk harm to others should not be open to state or social interference. Mill's version of the harm principle is strictly anti-paternalistic: state or social coercion cannot be justified by appeal to the individual's own good, but must refer to the social good. This principle continues to influence law and policy, not least with respect to sexual morality.

In his democratic theory, Mill argued that only democracy could provide the check on power necessary for progress, but also that measures should be taken to promote the competence of political authorities and the education of the democratic public. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), he therefore advocated for universal suffrage and democratic participation, but also for proportional representation and plural votes for those with demonstrated aptitude. As a political economist, Mill favored free trade but also a form of democratic socialism defined by worker cooperatives, the regulation of property rights, and redistributive taxation. His work on the “stationary state” (CW III.752-7) continues to influence economists concerned about the effects of economic growth on environmental sustainability.

In *The Subjection of Women*, he provided one of the first sustained arguments for women's full equal rights. On this and other matters he was greatly influenced by his close collaborator and wife, Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858). Mill also vehemently criticized slavery and repeatedly argued that differences among groups were the result of circumstantial or cultural

factors, and not due to differences in their natures. His very qualified support for colonialism as a temporary measure for societies that he thought needed the guidance of “leading-strings” (CW XIX.396) followed from his general view that *all* societies needed such guidance at one point or another. But he was more alive to the evils of British rule over Ireland than over India, and his role as a high-ranking administrator in the East India Company has deserved close scrutiny. In general, Mill campaigned for the rights of minorities and the disadvantaged, and endured criticism for his progressive views.

Mill’s views on religion were, for the most part, revealed only posthumously with the publication of his *Autobiography* (1873) and the essays “Utility of Religion” (1874) and “Theism” (1874). For most of his career, he had avoided commenting publicly on the rationality of religious belief because, despite his criticism of the Church as a dogmatic social institution, he intended his liberal proposals about freedom of discussion and “experiments in living” to include religious doctrines and believers. In a few places, he clarified that he did not believe utilitarianism to be at odds with religious belief if one appreciated the lesson of Plato’s *Euthyphro* (see EOPR0134) that right and wrong are not constituted by the will of God. He also admired the moral teachings of Jesus. However, Mill borrowed from Auguste Comte (1798-1857; see EOPR0080) the idea of a “religion of humanity” that could supplant the role of supernatural religion in sustaining a shared social morality. He also offered a naturalist theory of knowledge (see EOPR0262) in which the phenomena of experience proceed according to laws of nature and do not require any supernatural explanation. And he defended a compatibilist account of free will according to which human freedom, properly understood, is reconcilable with determinism.

In private letters and in his posthumously published writings, Mill argued that, given the evil in the world, God could not be both omnipotent and perfectly benevolent. He sometimes framed the problem of evil in terms of the many centuries of suffering endured by humans prior to establishing anything like a pleasant existence. Moreover, he thought eternal perdition in Hell for the faults of a finite life to be incompatible with an omnipotent and perfectly benevolent God. Mill argued that the most respectable theism would accept that God is not all-powerful, and is therefore unable to make the world the best it could be.

Mill was skeptical of *a priori* arguments for the existence of God. He accepted that the argument from design provides some support for God's existence, but he concluded that the evidence simply is not strong enough to justify belief. He also noted that the work of Charles Darwin (1809-1882; see EOPR0092) provides an alternative explanation to design. Although he argued that *belief* in God is not rationally supported, he thought one might permissibly entertain ideas of God as a matter of *hope* or *imagination* (see CW X.419, 426-7, 483-5; CW XVI.1196). While his personal views did not appeal to supernatural religious ideas, he allowed that *hope* in God, falling short of belief, could play a salutary role in one's moral life.

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