Madison Perry

History 127H

Mr. Del Corso

John Stuart Mill: Life and Lasting Influences

John Stuart Mill was the intellectual father of many of the ideas which have come to be identified with liberal democracy: the dominant political and economic philosophy in the modern Western world. Liberalism is based on notions of individual liberty, civil rights, equality of genders and races, and free economic markets[[1]](#footnote-0). Mill built upon the works of Jeremy Bentham, Adam Smith, John Locke, and Alexis de Tocqueville, among others, in an effort to create a cohesive and logical moral code applicable to individuals and society as a whole. In order to understand Mill’s historical importance and continued relevance, we must first examine his life and most influential works.

John Stuart Mill was born 1806 in Pentonville, England to James Mill and Harriet Barrow[[2]](#footnote-1). As the first of nine children, his family intellectually groomed him from birth, indoctrinating him in ancient languages and philosophy. Mill’s education was particularly guided towards economic and moral philosophy by his domineering father, James Mill. The elder Mill was a contemporary of Jeremy Bentham and both men led a group of thinkers called the Philosophic Radicals which took issue with the landowning aristocracy which dominated British politics at the time. They were proponents of the notion that all adult men should be given the right to vote and key developers of a philosophy they termed “utilitarianism”.

Through utilitarianism, Bentham and Mill endeavored to “devise a standard for human conduct”[[3]](#footnote-2) and evaluate the justice of laws/public policies. Bentham and Mill regarded a morally justifiable action as one which seeks to “promote the greatest amount of happiness”[[4]](#footnote-3), where they defined happiness as “pleasure and the absence of pain”[[5]](#footnote-4). All of these ideas filtered into John Stuart Mill’s mind and made him into a highly efficient pupil and assistant to his father.

In his 20s, Mill broke from his father’s ideology and intellectual control[[6]](#footnote-5). His rigorous education rendered him a brilliant rational thinker, yet also deprived him of a childhood and, Mill felt[[7]](#footnote-6), some measure of his humanity. As a result, Mill struck out on his own, adopting a more nuanced definition of what constitutes pleasure, extending it to include a person’s ability to achieve “individuality”. This directly challenged the beliefs of Jeremy Bentham who asserted that people always seek pleasure and avoid pain to achieve happiness[[8]](#footnote-7) In Mill’s view, a person’s need for certain freedoms could outweigh his or her inclination to maximize personal pleasure or societal well-being.

Mill’s staunch support of individual natural rights was the focus of his one of his first major works, titled *On Liberty*. In it, he expressed the belief that all people should enjoy “liberty of thought and feeling”[[9]](#footnote-8), “liberty of expressing and publishing opinions”[[10]](#footnote-9), “freedom to unite, for any purpose”[[11]](#footnote-10), and “liberty . . . of forming the plan of our life to suit our own character, of doing what we like”[[12]](#footnote-11) among others. These rights are not unlike those expressed in the U.S. Constitution, but their expression in *On Liberty* is significant because these notions were still relatively controversial in the Victorian period. During that time, England was still transitioning from its feudalistic past to an industrialized society and was home to a plethora of reform movements[[13]](#footnote-12). Many of these reform movements, including the temperance movement, sought to promote traditional values, which John Stuart Mill found to be overly restrictive of individuality. His book became very popular, particularly amongst university students, and was an oft-cited text in criticisms of the Victorian political establishment mounted by liberal reformers.

While formulating his ideas for *On Liberty*, Mill was profoundly influenced by *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville[[14]](#footnote-13). De Tocqueville was wary of the breakdown of strict class hierarchies in Europe and the potential destabilization that could entail, yet he viewed America as a useful case study in how a federal system could impact individual liberty. Mill also held these sentiments, expressing fears about a “tyranny of the majority”[[15]](#footnote-14) rising in the wake of aristocratic rule. As a response, Mill formulated the “harm principle”[[16]](#footnote-15) which stated that the chief responsibility of government should be to protect a person's ability to seek happiness and by preserving the aforementioned rights, the government is effectively maximizing utility. This directly connects *On Liberty* to Mill’s next treatise, *Utilitarianism*.

Mill endeavored to refine *Utilitarianism* into a cohesive ideology which could justify both the maximization of individual liberty and the maximization of utility on a collective scale. Within his 83-page treatise, he argued against misunderstandings from all directions; some claimed that utilitarianism was merely self-serving hedonism at the expense of society, while others claimed that maximizing the collective greater good necessitated the sacrifice of personal liberties. Mill also provided a secular motivation to place importance on the general happiness, which contrasted with the religious version of utilitarianism that was popular among the educated classes in 19th century Britain[[17]](#footnote-16). He defined a right as “something which society ought to defend me in the possession of,”[[18]](#footnote-17) and went on to say “If the objector goes on to ask why it ought, I can give no other reason than general utility”[[19]](#footnote-18). Even today, utility is used as a vital theoretical measure in economics. It is the means by which economists evaluate between comparable market baskets and map consumer preferences. Utility is measured along indifference curves, which provide the basis for deriving the behavior of demand curves. In essence, the concept of utility is what makes the ubiquitous supply and demand model possible.

Another major influence on Mill’s ideology and writings was his wife Harriet Taylor Mill[[20]](#footnote-19). Harriet Taylor was initially married to another man when she and Mill met, yet the two carried out a relationship for nearly 20 years until Taylor’s husband passed away, at which point Taylor and Mill married. Taylor was Mill’s intellectual equal and often helped him write and edit his works before publication. Mill credited Harriet Taylor and her daughter[[21]](#footnote-20) for helping him develop his stance on women’s rights and regarded them both as inspirations for Mill’s pamphlet “On the Subjection of Women”.

Published the year Mill left Parliament, “On the Subjection of Women” was radical for a time when Victorian society regarded a wife’s personal property and children as legally belonging to her husband. In the pamphlet, Mill espoused ideas such as universal suffrage and equality between men and women[[22]](#footnote-21). This work is regarded as one of the earliest major works of Feminist Philosophy[[23]](#footnote-22) and ideas proposed by Mill and Taylor Mill were later integrated into liberal philosophy[[24]](#footnote-23) as a whole. Even today, Western liberal democracies seek to achieve gender equality and expand civil liberties and opportunities to women in developing nations through humanitarian efforts like those of the Oslo Women’s Rights Initiative and UN Women.

Perhaps his single most influential work, Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* was published in 1885 and subsequently replaced Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* as the primary economic text used in universities[[25]](#footnote-24). In *Principles*, John Stuart Mill explored the idea that acting on self-interest in trade is beneficial to all parties involved, both individual and collective. This was a continuation of Adam Smith’s theory of the “invisible hand” guiding the forces of supply and demand to an equilibrium where all involved incur maximum benefit. While Smith believed that improved social conditions were contingent upon economic progress, Mill asserted that both realms of improvement were contingent upon individualism. This belief was a product of his observations of rising inequality within industrializing Britain. Mill posited that the laws of production followed Smith’s description, but the decisions of the elite ruling class determined the distribution of wealth[[26]](#footnote-25).

In order to resolve this issue, Mill envisioned a world in which workers elect their bosses and “collect wages from the profits of the enterprise”[[27]](#footnote-26). Mill’s support for a laissez-faire economic system was tempered by his utilitarian beliefs including preventing monopolies and providing means of education for children[[28]](#footnote-27). These values are echoed today in modern policy-making, as maximizing public wellbeing remains the primary justification for interrupting the efficient yet often inequitable free market. Additionally, the idea of businesses being collectively owned by their workers remains a flashpoint for discussion in capitalist liberal democracies[[29]](#footnote-28) like the US, as shown when the Yogurt company Chobani made headlines in April 2016 for deciding to transition towards being worker-owned[[30]](#footnote-29). Mill’s economic ideas are inseparably linked to his moral philosophy and would today likely be termed “utilitarian socialism”. Many of Mill’s values went on to serve as inspiration for modern “European socialism”, defined as a “mixed economy model with universal social rights promoted by social democratic parties”[[31]](#footnote-30).

Throughout his life, John Stuart Mill amassed a collection of writings on nearly every philosophical topic. His works fueled the liberalist reform movements which arose to criticize Victorian values and have remained an important window into the issues which faced Europe during the industrial revolution[[32]](#footnote-31). The full extent of Mill’s influence is immeasurable due to the fact that his books are still so widely taught in universities, where they retain the potential to shape countless minds.

**Note**: Extension granted via email on October 2, 2018.

**Sources**

**Primary**

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism* London: Fraser's Magazine, 1861; reprint, London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1879, Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11224/11224-h/11224-h.htm> (accessed September 9, 2018)

Mill, John Stuart. *Principles of Political Economy* New York: D. Appleton And Company, 1885, Project Gutenberg <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30107/30107-pdf.pdf> (accessed September 9, 2018).

[Mill, John Stuart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stuart_Mill). [*The Subjection of Women*](https://archive.org/details/subjectionofwome00millrich) London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1869, Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/subjectionofwome00millrich> (accessed October 3, 2018).

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty* London: Longman, Roberts, & Green Co., 1869, The Library of Economics and Liberty <https://www.econlib.org/library/Mill/mlLbty.html> (accessed October 6, 2018).

**Secondary**

Beyeler, Michelle. “European Socialism.” *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (2014) <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118474396.wbept0338> (Accessed October 7, 2018).

Carbone, Peter F. "John Stuart Mill on Freedom, Education, and Social Reform." *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue De La Pensée Éducative* 17, no. 1 (1983): 3-11. at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23767850>.(Accessed September 9, 2018).

Collini, Winch, Burrow, Winch, Donald, and Burrow, J. W. *That Noble Science of Politics a Study in Nineteenth-century Intellectual History*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Constitutional Rights Foundation, “John Stuart Mill and Individual Liberty.” *Bill of Rights in Action*Volume 24, No. 4 (Spring 2009) at <http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-24-4-john-stuart-mill-and-individual-liberty.html> (accessed October 4, 2018).

Crimmins, James E., "Jeremy Bentham", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/bentham/> (accessed October 8, 2018).

Domeyer, Axel.“Historical Context for On Liberty and Other Essays by John Stuart Mill”, *Columbia College*, New York City:Department of Political Science, Columbia University. <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/liberty-and-other-essays/context> (Accessed October 7, 2018).

Heydt, Colin. “John Stuart Mill” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ISSN 2161-0002, via <https://www.iep.utm.edu/milljs/#SH2d> (Accessed October 2, 2018).

Hoxie, Josh. “Worker-Owned Firms To Rival Chobani” *Inequality.org* (April 2016). <https://inequality.org/great-divide/5-workerowned-food-firms-rival-chobani/> (Accessed October 4, 2018).

Gaus, Gerald, Courtland, Shane D. and Schmidtz, David, "Liberalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition). at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/> (Accessed October 4, 2018)

Macleod, Christopher, "John Stuart Mill", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/mill/> (Accessed September 9, 2018).

Schwartz, Justin. “Where Did Mill Go Wrong?: Why the Capital-Managed Firm Rather than the Labor-Managed Enterprise Is the Predominant Organizational Form in Market Economies” *The Ohio State Law Journal* Vol. 73:2 (2012): 219-285. , at <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/students/groups/oslj/files/2012/05/73.2.Schwartz.pdf> (Accessed September 9, 2018).

1. Gaus, Gerald, Courtland, Shane D. and Schmidtz, David, "Liberalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition) Accessed October 4, 2018, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Macleod, Christopher, "John Stuart Mill", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition) Accessed September 9, 2018, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/mill/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Constitutional Rights Foundation, “John Stuart Mill and Individual Liberty.” *Bill of Rights in Action*Volume 24, No. 4 (Spring 2009). Accessed October 3, 2018, at <http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-24-4-john-stuart-mill-and-individual-liberty.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Collini, Winch, Burrow, Winch, Donald, and Burrow, J. W. *That Noble Science of Politics a Study in Nineteenth-century Intellectual History*. (103-104), 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism* London: Fraser's Magazine, 1861.

   Quote pulled from Ch. 2, Paragraph 2, accessed via Project Gutenberg at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30107/30107-pdf.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Macleod, "John Stuart Mill", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Crimmins, James E., "Jeremy Bentham", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition)

   <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/bentham/> (accessed October 8, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty* London: Longman, Roberts, & Green Co., 1869. Accessed via EconLib at <https://www.econlib.org/library/Mill/mlLbty.html> (accessed October 6, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Domeyer, Axel.“Historical Context for On Liberty and Other Essays by John Stuart Mill”, *Columbia College*, New York City:Department of Political Science, Columbia University. <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/liberty-and-other-essays/context> (Accessed October 7, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Heydt, Colin. “John Stuart Mill” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ISSN 2161-0002,

    <https://www.iep.utm.edu/milljs/#SH2d> (Accessed October 5, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty* London: Longman, Roberts, & Green Co., 1869 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Heydt, “John Stuart Mill” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism* London: Fraser's Magazine, 1861.

    Quote pulled from Ch.5, Paragraph 6, accessed via Project Gutenberg at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11224/11224-h/11224-h.htm> (accessed September 9, 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Macleod, Christopher, "John Stuart Mill", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. [Mill, John Stuart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stuart_Mill). [*The Subjection of Women*](https://archive.org/details/subjectionofwome00millrich) London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1869. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/subjectionofwome00millrich> (accessed October 3, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Heydt, Colin. “John Stuart Mill” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. Gaus, Gerald, Courtland, Shane D. and Schmidtz, David, "Liberalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Heydt, Colin. “John Stuart Mill” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Mill, John Stuart. *Principles of Political Economy* New York: D. Appleton And Company, 1885. Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30107/30107-pdf.pdf> (accessed September 9, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Carbone, Peter F. "John Stuart Mill on Freedom, Education, and Social Reform." *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue De La Pensée Éducative* 17, no. 1 (1983): 3-11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23767850>.(Accessed September 9, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. Schwartz, Justin. “Where Did Mill Go Wrong?: Why the Capital-Managed Firm Rather than the Labor-Managed Enterprise Is the Predominant Organizational Form in Market Economies” *The Ohio State Law Journal* Vol. 73:2 (2012): 219-285. <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/students/groups/oslj/files/2012/05/73.2.Schwartz.pdf> (Accessed September 9, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. Hoxie, Josh. “Worker-Owned Firms To Rival Chobani” *Inequality.org* (April 2016) <https://inequality.org/great-divide/5-workerowned-food-firms-rival-chobani/> (Accessed October 4, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. Beyeler, Michelle. “European Socialism.” *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (2014) Abstract only. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118474396.wbept0338> (Accessed October 7, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Domeyer, Axel.“Historical Context for On Liberty and Other Essays by John Stuart Mill”, *Columbia College.* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)