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Mill's Mind: A Biographical Sketch

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Benjamin Franklin exhorted his fellows to "either write something worth reading or do something worth writing." John Stuart Mill (like Franklin himself) is among that rare breed who managed to do both. It hardly needs stating – especially in a volume such as the one in your hands – that Mill's writing and thought is influential. Across the field of political philosophy, ethics, gender studies, and economics, his writings still carry a good deal of weight. If the true measure of greatness is posthumous productivity, as Goethe suggested, Mill's status is assured.

But Mill's life holds plenty of interest, too, not least for the additional light it shines on the development of his thought. In this brief biographical sketch, I hope to show this relationship between life and work in two areas in particular. First, the way in which Mill's extraordinary upbringing and education fuelled his journey away from utilitarianism towards liberalism; and second, how his relationship with Harriet Taylor influenced his thinking on gender equality, most obviously, but also on the potentially damaging influence of social custom.

Mill was a quintessential public intellectual before the term was created; an advocate for a humanist, self-reflective life – the "Saint of Rationalism," as William Gladstone dubbed him – but also a man of political action. John Morley, a Liberal politician and writer and a disciple of Mill's, described him as "a man of extreme sensibility and vital heat in things worth waxing hot about" (Morley 1921: i.55).

There were many such things, too: parliamentary reform, the US Civil War and slavery, the Irish potato famine, religious freedom, inherited power and wealth, and women's rights, to name only the most obvious. These were issues to which Mill was intellectually and politically committed. But they became personal, too. It is useful to consider Mill's personal journey, not simply because it is interesting in itself, but because his ideas bear a strong imprint of the personal and political circumstances of his life. Mill was an intensely autobiographical thinker: for him, the political and personal were intertwined.

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Mill's life was out of the ordinary from the beginning. After his birth on May 20, 1806, his father, James Mill, wrote to another new father and proposed "to run a fair race … in the education of a son. Let us have a well-disputed trial which of us twenty years hence can exhibit the most accomplished and virtuous young man" (Mill 1976: 11).

Mill was home-schooled by his father, a historian and disciple of Jeremy Bentham. The education was, as Isaiah Berlin observed, "an appalling success" (Berlin 2002: 220). By six, Mill had written a history of Rome; by seven he was reading Plato in Greek, at eight soaking up Sophocles, Thucydides and Demosthenes; at nine enjoying the Pope's translation of The *Iliad*, reading it "twenty to thirty times." By the age of 11 he was devouring Aristotle's works on logic, before being moved on at 12 to political economy. Not that the young Mill has to be coerced: as he recalled later, "I never remember being so wrapt up in any book, as I was in Joyce's Scientific Dialogues." In 1819 he undertook "a complete course of political economy" (*Autobiography*, I: 13, 21, 31). (It may have helped that David Ricardo had become a friend of the family, and was fond of Mill junior).

But Mill was lonely, and reserved. "As I had no boy companions, my amusements, which were mostly solitary, were in general of a quiet, if not a bookish turn," he observed. He could talk to his father about cerebral matters, but never emotional ones. Mill's mother does not feature in the final, published version of his *Autobiography* at all: but in earlier, discarded drafts, he ponders how different life might have been if he had been blessed with "that rarity in England, a really warm-hearted mother" (*Rejected Leaves*, I: 610, 612).

After a year in France as an adolescent – turning Mill into a lifelong Francophile – he was baptized into the utilitarian faith, after being presented with Jeremy Bentham's work on the moral foundation of the law. The opening sentences of the work are surely among the clearest in moral philosophy:

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters: pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. (Bentham 1962: 1)

Bentham was in fact a very close family friend to the Mills, providing them with financial support in the form of what amounted to a rent subsidy, intellectual engagement and even access to a country home, where the Mill–Bentham routine of reading, writing, editing, and educating was interrupted by bracing walks, even the occasional dance.

When Mill read Bentham, in Dumont's French translation, as he recounted,

> the vista of improvement which he [Bentham] did open was sufficiently large and brilliant to light up my life, as well as to give a definite shape to my aspirations … I now had opinions; a creed; a doctrine; a philosophy; in one among the best sense of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of which could be made the principal outward purpose of a life. (*Autobiography*, I: 71)

But during a self-described "mental crisis" in 1826 and 1827, Mill began his long and difficult journey away from a narrow, Benthamite utilitarianism vision towards a

profound belief in the inalienable value of individuality and the humanist liberalism that would illuminate his most famous work, *On Liberty*. Mill was helped out of his depression by poetry – famously dismissed by Bentham as no better than push-pin – including the verse of Wordsworth and Coleridge, very far from being required reading for the philosophical radicals clustered under the Benthamite banner. (When Mill visited Wordsworth in the Lake District in 1831, his more orthodox radical friend and travelling companion, Henry Cole, pointedly stayed away.) Mill's much-tested friendship with Carlyle survived the accidental burning by Mill's maid of the only copy of the first volume of Carlyle's monumental history of the French revolution.

Mill's "crisis," and his increasingly negative reflections on his own upbringing, had a clear impact on the development of his philosophy. I do not intend, here, to adjudicate the various attempts to reconcile Mill's utilitarianism and liberalism; that is better left to others in this volume. I will restrict myself to suggesting that Mill was a weak utilitarian, because he was a good liberal.

Biography matters in understanding the development of Mill's thought here. He became highly sensitive to criticism, from those such as Thomas Carlyle, that he was a "manufactured man." And not least because he agreed with it:

> I conceive that the description so often given of a Benthamite, as a mere reasoning machine was, during two or three years of my life not altogether untrue of me. (*Autobiography*, I: 111)

Mill felt trapped by one element of his youthful creed, the "associationist" psychology of Hartley, which implied that everyone is shaped by their circumstances into the person they are destined to remain. We are what we are raised to be:

> [During] the later returns of my dejection, the doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed on my existence like an incubus. I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our own power. (*Autobiography*, I: 175–176)

Mill's departure from this brand of psychological determinism was painful, both personally and intellectually. But following his crisis, and during subsequent bouts of depression, it became vitally important to Mill to feel that he was the master of his destiny, living under his own intellectual propulsion. Mill's rejection of the Benthamite version of utilitarianism – at first *sotto voce*, but increasingly loudly – and his embrace and advocacy of a Humboldtian, developmental liberalism are reflections of his own private journey.

In *On Liberty*, Mill criticized those who conform to any of "the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character" (*Liberty*, XVIII: 267–8). It is hard to read this description without thinking of how Mill himself saw himself as breaking free from a mould provided not by "society," but by his father. We are only truly free when our "desires and impulses" are our own, in Mill's view: when we have our own character, rather than the character prescribed for us by others (*Liberty*, XVIII: 264).

Although one of Mill's best-known works is his *Utilitarianism*, he was ambivalent, even dismissive, about the work himself. In a letter to Alexander Bain, on October 15, 1859,

he described the work as "a little treatise" (Letter to Alexander Bain, Oct 15, 1859, XV: 640). A few weeks later, also to Bain, he wrote: "I do not think of publishing my Utilitarianism till next winter at the earliest, though it is now finished … It will be but a small book…" (Letter to Alexander Bain, Nov 14, 1859, XV: 645). To W.G. Ward, Mill described the work as a "little manuscript treatise" (Letter to William Ward, Nov 28, 1859, XV: 640). *Utilitarianism* ran to four editions during his lifetime, but Mill – generally a diligent reviser of his work – barely touched it. Of the changes that he made, just eight are of any substance. This treatment contrasts strongly with the editorial investments he made in the many editions of the *Principles of Political Economy*, the *System of Logic* and – perhaps most comparable – *Representative Government*, to which Mill made 105 substantive changes for the second edition alone.

It is the only work of any significance that Mill fails to treat in any detail in the *Autobiography*. An important question is: why did he write it? The motives appear to a mixture of defensiveness and guilt. Having become an increasingly outspoken critic of Bentham himself, Mill worried that following the death of his father and Bentham, utilitarianism had been left without serious defenders. Explaining his motives in 1858 to Theodor Gomperz, his German translator, he wrote, "there are not many defences [sic] extant of the ethics of utility" (Letter to Theodor Gomperz, Aug 30, 1858: 570). To Charles Dupont-White in 1861 he explained that "l'idée de l'Utile été…très impopulaire" (Letter to Charles Dupont-White, Oct 10 1861, XV: 745).

Since the work was, for Mill, backward-looking, an attempt to compensate for earlier assaults, he failed to take opportunities to clarify and thereby strengthen his treatment. One example of editorial neglect stands out particularly starkly, given the intellectual history of the work. The weakness of Mill's "proof" of utility was immediately apparent, even to Mill's allies. Theodor Gomperz pointed it out to him in 1863, just after first publication of the first edition of the book in February.[1] But Mill made no alterations, in either the second edition (1864) or the third (1867). In some frustration, Gomperz tried again in 1868 as he was preparing a German translation:

> Let me conclude by expressing my regret that you did not in the later editions of the Utilitarianism remove the stumbling block … pp. 51–52 1st ed. (audible, visible – desirable) which when pointed out to you by me, you said you would remove. (Gomperz 1868)

In his reply a few days later, Mill admits the problem, professes to have forgotten about it, claims he has been too busy in the preceding five years to address it, and then asks Gomperz to do it for him, in the German edition:

> With regard to the passage you mention in the Utilitarianism *I have not had time regularly to rewrite the book* & it had escaped my memory that you thought that argument apparently though not really fallacious which proves to me the necessity of, at least, some further explanation & development. I beg that in the translation you will kindly reserve the passage to yourself, & please remove the stumbling block, by expressing the real argument in such terms as you think will express it best. (Letter to Theodor Gomperz, Feb 18, 1866, CW XXXII: 163, my emphasis)

Gomperz, reasonably enough, leaves the flawed passage: it was not his job or place to fix a problem of this kind. The resulting weakness in Mill's argument has provided sport for

undergraduate philosophers ever since, and as Alan Ryan points out, the essay has "become a classic through the efforts of its opponents rather than those of its friends" (Ryan 1982: 12).

This rather shocking neglect was however of a piece with Mill's distance from the work: between the first publication of the essay and his death twelve years later, *Utilitarianism* is mentioned by Mill just eleven times in his correspondence, compared to thirty-three references to *On Liberty*. While he published many of his works – *On Liberty* and *Principles of Political Economy* for example – as cheap "people's editions" (for which he received no royalties), he appears never to have considered doing so for *Utilitarianism*. In 1866, he asked Longman to send some free copies of his most important works to the Durham Cooperative Institute: *Utilitarianism* was not on the list (Letter to William Longman, Feb 18, 1866, XXXII: 163).

A number of scholars, not least Alan Ryan and Wendy Donner, and various authors in this volume, have worked hard to make a better job of presenting Mill's mature utilitarianism than he managed himself in this essay (Donner 1998; Ryan 1974). My only point here is that a biographical examination of the question shows that by the time Mill wrote and published *Utilitarianism*, his heart wasn't in it – and that's at least one reason why it is, by his standards, a poor-quality piece of work (Reeves 2008: 333).

Of course, Mill was not an academic publishing in peer review journals. Like most of his contemporaries, he was an amateur intellectual. He did not attend school or university. His day job was at the East India Company, following in his father's footsteps, where he rose gradually to the heights of First Examiner. He walked to work each morning and began each day with a cup of tea and a boiled egg. (Mill wrote precious little about India, however, and unlike Macaulay, never troubled to visit the county he spent his mornings administering.)

In addition to his civil service duties, Mill was a debater, journalist, editor, and politician. In his twenties, he was an enthusiastic participant in the burgeoning debating club culture. He was not a charismatic speaker by any means, but was sharp in argument, and had the writer's ability to coin a resonant phrase. Mill also ended up running the *London and Westminster Quarterly*, a platform from which he could bring Alexis de Tocqueville's work to a British audience. In fact, Tocqueville bound Mill's review of his landmark book Democracy in America into his own working copy, on the grounds that the two had to be read together for his own work to be fully appreciated.

Mill's reputation was made by his *System of Logic*, published in 1843, and burnished by his 1848 *Principles of Political Economy*. William Gladstone was heavily influenced by Mill's economics, and the success of the *Principles* gave him, according to the Victorian writer Walter Bagehot, a "monarchical" status in political economy for decades (Bagehot 1915: 120).

But it was *On Liberty*, published in 1859, the year after the death of his wife Harriet, and dedicated to her memory, that secured Mill his lasting place in intellectual history. The essay synthesized Mill's mature philosophy, centered on the idea of individual growth, progress and cultivation. A liberal society, for Mill, was one in which each person was free to progress "nearer to the best thing they can be" (*Liberty*, XVIII: 267). Mill prefixed his essay with what he called a "motto" from Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Sphere and Duties of Government*, published in 1854: "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the

absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity" (*Autobiography*, I: 191; *Liberty*, XVIII: 215). Mill endorsed Humboldt's claim that "the end of man … is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole" (*Liberty*, XVIII: 261; Reeves 2008: 278).

Mill's liberalism was founded on a conviction that the range of opportunities for self-creation and autonomy were the standard against which cultures, political systems, economic institutions, and philosophical ideas should be judged. When Mill argued against repression, he did not use spatial terms like "invade" or "interfere." For him, repression inhibited natural growth, with people turned into "pollards," or being "compressed," "cramped," "pinched," "dwarfed," "starved," or "withered" (VF: 278).

Here, Mill was clearly able to draw a connection to his own life. For him, self-development was a personal issue. He saw his own upbringing as constricted, especially emotionally. But he also believed his education had given him the resources to escape from the path on which he had been set. Mill described his journey to Carlyle:

> None however of them all has become so unlike what he once was as myself, who originally was the narrowest of them all…fortunately however I was not *crammed*; my own thinking faculties were called into strong though partial play; & by their means I have been able to *remake* all my opinions. (Letter to Thomas Carlyle, Oct 22, 1832, XII: 128)

Mill worked for his entire career for the East India Company, the same organization that had employed his father. In fact, he owed the job to his father:

> In May 1823, my professional occupation and status for the next thirty-five years of my life, were *decided by my father's obtaining for me* an appointment from the East India Company, in the office of the Examiner of India Correspondence, immediately under himself. (*Autobiography*, I: 82, my emphasis)

Mill, as noted earlier, was justifiably afraid of being – and of being seen as – a "made man." For Mill, it was vitally important that individuals not only be authors of their opinions, but also architects of their lives:

> He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. (*Liberty*, XVIII: 262)

One of the chief obstacles to self-expression and self-development identified by Mill is the "despotism of custom." This was a theme of much of his writing; again, biographical factors are important here, specifically the influence of Harriet Taylor, who Mill met in the summer of 1830. Harriet was married with children and the status of her relationship with Mill during the years up until her husband's death in 1849 has been the subject of gossip and speculation ever since. More importantly, the scope of Harriet's intellectual influence has also been hotly contested all along. Godefroy Cavaignac, a French refugee and leading light in the *Société des Droits de l'Homme* dubbed her "the Armida of the London and Westminster."[2]

Harriet's role has occupied the attention of scholars since. Nicholas Capaldi suggests Harriet was a "great influence" on Mill's life and thought (Capaldi 2004: xiv); for Jo

Ellen Jacobs, her work, "beginning with the *Principles of Political Economy*, tended more and more towards co-authorship" (Jacobs 2002: 196). Hayek devoted a book to the subject. Helen McCabe's chapter in this volume argues that Mill "would not have been half the man he was without her."

According to Michael Packe, Harriet wielded an "astounding, almost hypnotic control of Mill's mind" (Packe 1954: 315). Packe also claimed for Harriet a good deal of the credit for Mill's subsequent essays – especially *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*: "In so far as Mill's influence, theoretic or applied, has been of advantage to the progress of the western world, or indeed of humanity at large," he wrote, "the credit should rest upon his wife *at least as much* as himself" (Packe 1954: 371, my emphasis).

In private and in public, Mill was at pains to emphasize Harriet's unique brilliance, eclipsing his own merely workmanlike abilities. Sometimes he did in fact position himself as a mere translator of her thoughts, as her amanuensis, likening her at one point to Bentham, "the originating mind," and himself to Dumont, the French translator of Bentham's *Traite de Legislation* (Letter to Harriet Taylor Mill, Aug 30, 1853, XIV: 112). "Unfortunately for both," recounted his friend Alexander Bain, "he outraged all reasonable credibility in describing her matchless genius, without being able to supply corroborating evidence" (Bain 1882: 171).

There is no question that Harriet was an important influence on Mill's thinking and that they worked together in close intellectual partnership. Here again, Mill's biography is interwoven with his thought. His relationship with Harriet, for example, both directly and indirectly shaped his views about the dangers of social custom. Mill and Harriet suffered from gossip and social exclusion during the years of their unusual relationship while Harriet's husband was still alive. Unsurprisingly, they shared a strong fear and dislike of the power of custom.

It is in fact quite difficult in the early years of their relationship to disentangle the effects of Harriet on Mill, from those of Mill on Harriet, on this particular subject. A review by Harriet of Sarrans' *Louise Phillipe and the Revolution of 1830* has clear Millian markings. Or put differently, the quotes from Harriet's essay lamenting the "phantom power" of the "opinion of society," and the centrality of "self-dependence" could be dropped unnoticed into almost any paragraph in *On Genius* – or indeed *On Liberty* (*Enfranchisement of Women*, XXI: 399–400).

An unpublished essay of Harriet's from the early 1830s (it is not dated but is on paper watermarked "1832") describes the "spirit of conformity" as:

> [T]he root of all intolerance … what is called the opinion of society is a phantom power, yet as is often the case with phantoms, of more force over the minds of the unthinking than all the flesh and blood arguments which can be brought to bear against it. It is a combination of the many weak, against the few strong. (Taylor 1832: 264–5)

Harriet also strengthened Mill's support on women's rights, a subject on which he became increasingly outspoken as the years passed. (He was even able to persuade Florence Nightingale of the cause.) Mill was the first MP to put down legislation to give women the vote, winning seventy-four votes to his side, and was the moving spirit in the National Society for Women's Suffrage. Millicent Fawcett described him as the "principal originator of the women's movement" (Fawcett 1873: 85).

During his short tenure as a Member of Parliament, Mill dueled Benjamin Disraeli over the right to protest in public parks, and won. A corner of Hyde Park stands to this day as a testament to his victory. The Tories, he declared, were "the stupid party," or, as he later clarified his view in Parliament: "I never meant to say that the Conservatives are generally stupid. I meant to say that stupid people are generally Conservative" (*Speech on Representation of the People*, XXVIII: 61). He was also, in addition to his work on women's rights, a passionate advocate for the north in the US Civil War in the 1860s, for more support to Ireland during the famine of the 1840s, for opening up the British civil service through competitive examination, and for women's and girls' education in England and India.

Following his retirement from the East India Company in 1858 and ejection from Parliament a decade later in 1868, Mill spent most of his time in Avignon in southern France, where Harriet had died.

In the Spring of 1873, Mill picked up erysipelas, the result of a bacterial infection following a botanising expedition near his French home. He told his stepdaughter: "you know that I have done my work" (Packe 1954: 705). Indeed, he had. Mill was buried next to his wife, in a funeral with just five attendees, proof, if any were needed, of Dickens' claim that "the more truly great the man, the more truly little the ceremony" (Ackroyd 1990: xiii).

Notes

1 See Weinberg (1963) for an account of the interaction between Gomperz and Mill.

2 Armida is an enchantress in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* who lured crusading knights away from their duty, popularized through operas by Gluck and Rossini. Cavaignac may have been suffering from sour grapes: there is some evidence that Mill rejected his literary offerings, see *VF*, p. 139.

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