

Is He or Isn't He?

Locating John Stuart Mill in Nineteenth Century Philosophy

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This paper was written for History 416: Nineteenth Century German and European Intellectual History, taught by Professor Scott Spector in Fall 2008.

John Stuart Mill, son of the noted British philosopher James Mill, is routinely grouped with Jeremy Bentham as one of the great Utilitarian thinkers of the nineteenth century. He was devoted to preserving and expanding liberty, along with promoting a limited government. However, his writings demonstrate a deep skepticism regarding the complete faculty of human reason as deified by Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century, as well as his own father. To Mill, the philosophic, rational approach, and especially the Utilitarian ideas espoused by Bentham, is incomplete in that it fails to consider alternative opinions or human emotions which do not fit into the image of the rational, calculating man. To Mill, the Enlightenment philosophers became too subversive in their singular focus on the flaws of society. Moreover, Mill's writing on Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the noted Romantic writer and poet, commends his philosophic reaction to the Enlightenment. Finally, some of Mill's writing is strikingly similar to the way Edmund Burke, a founder of conservatism, responded to the French Revolution. Taken together, then, Mill's writings, though often lumped in with the Utilitarian philosophers of the nineteenth century, tempers the kind of thought which proceeded from the Enlightenment notion of reason with a view of humanity that draws from the Romantics and even some strains of conservative thought.

To begin, Mill's ambivalence towards earlier Utilitarian premises seems to be, at least in part, a reaction against his father, James Mill. James believed in the new *tabula rasa*

theory, which held that the mind was a blank slate, and therefore could be completely molded by the education a child receives. Therefore, J.S. Mill was not enrolled in school but was tutored rigorously from a young age encompassing all the areas of study his father deemed necessary.¹ In her introduction to *On Liberty*, Elizabeth Rapaport explains that J.S. Mill saw himself as “emotionally starved” by his father’s painstaking educational regimen. The Enlightenment brought to the forefront the concept of the unique human faculty of reason, through which all things would eventually be understood. Many philosophers even concluded that through the development of this reason, humankind had the potential for perfection. Mill’s writings however, betray some ambivalence towards this notion. He felt that these philosophers reduced humanity to something much simpler than it was; devoid of emotion. In his essay, *Coleridge*, published in 1840, Mill says, “philosophy fell into the hands of men of a dry prosaic nature, who had not enough of the materials of human feeling in them to be able to imagine any of its more complex and mysterious manifestations.”² Other writings of his exhibit similar frustrations, reflecting on the imperfection, rather than the perfection, of human faculties.³ Thus, he sees other important aspects of humanity as influencing the way people act. J.S. Mill’s emphasis on human emotion and other human traits in addition to reason seems to be an important development and reaction against the unemotional, painstaking instruction he received from his father throughout his early life.

¹ Elizabeth Rapaport, “Introduction,” *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), viii.

² John Stuart Mill, “Coleridge,” *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 202.

³ Mill, “Coleridge,” 183.

Jeremy Bentham was in fact one of the tutors James Mill hired for his son. Bentham's utilitarianism developed directly from Enlightenment ideas regarding science and how its methods could be applied to philosophy. Mill's essay *Bentham*, published in 1838, praises him for the new method of rational calculation that he brought to philosophy, but criticizes him for failing to consider other influences on the human mind, such as experience, beauty, love, or spiritual matters. Mill believes that Bentham's great achievement was bringing to the study of philosophy scientific methods of investigation and calculation. In this vein, one of Bentham's most famous contributions was the idea of the "felicific calculus" or "greatest happiness principle." This principle held that human beings were essentially rational creatures, who could calculate the amount of potential pleasures versus the amount of potential pain to be derived from any act; and make decisions accordingly. His dogmatic and scientific approach to study was exactly the kind James Mill wanted for his son. However, J.S. Mill is deeply critical of this approach. He states, "Bentham's knowledge of human nature is bounded. It is wholly empirical; and the empiricism of one who has had little experience."⁴ In Mill's view, Bentham disregarded what made man human. Characteristically utilitarian, Bentham enumerated a group of "Springs of Action" that he believed motivate man. Mill, however, says that there are also many seemingly *irrational* things that motivate man; a sense of honor, a love of beauty, and religion, among others.⁵ Though an unlikely comparison, his criticisms even resemble those of Edmund Burke to the French Revolutionaries. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke writes that the revolutionaries "are so taken up with their theories about the rights of man, that they have

⁴ John Stuart Mill, "Bentham," *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 149.

⁵ Mill, "Bentham," 153.

totally forgot his nature.”⁶ Mill states that Bentham’s calculation can be used when something can be done without any moral influences; only the business parts of human interactions, but nothing spiritual or otherwise.⁷ While Mill is able to appreciate this rational style of thinking, for him, Bentham takes this too far and disregards other vital human impulses.

Additionally, Mill criticizes Bentham for believing too strongly in his own methods and convictions while ignoring any contrary to his own. Mill’s own political writings demonstrate his prevailing belief that interaction with conflicting opinions and ideas is vital to any comprehensive knowledge and to liberty itself. Indeed, one of the most prominent themes in *On Liberty* is the importance of allowing dissenting thought, as one of the guarantors essential to freedom. Mill calls the silencing of expression a “peculiar evil,” and demands that all people must be allowed to think and speak freely, even if those in power do not agree with them.⁸ In his view, “judgment is given to men that they may use it. Because it may be used erroneously, are men to be told that they ought not to use it at all?”⁹ Later on, he continues; “both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post as soon as there is no enemy in the field.”¹⁰ The notion of deepening one’s understanding from studying conflicting beliefs seems to be central to Mill. In his essay on Coleridge, he explains that Bentham and Coleridge are complete philosophical opposites of each other. Instead of choosing one philosophy over the other, however, he says that their methods and ideas should be used to complement and complete each other’s. The person that could do this,

⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

⁷ Mill, “Bentham,” 157.

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 16.

⁹ Mill, *On Liberty*, 18.

¹⁰ Mill, *On Liberty*, 41.

Mill states, would have mastered all of the English philosophy of that time.¹¹ Evidently, Mill truly values the study of conflicting opinions as essential to developing a more complete understanding of the world around him. To Mill, this applies not only to governments, but to anyone who proposes to teach or influence others. Thus, he sees one of Bentham's greatest failings as a philosopher in refusing to consider opinions contrary to his own.

J.S. Mill does not only criticize Jeremy Bentham, however. Indeed, he reproaches the whole school of his Enlightenment predecessors as having gone too far with their work by being too seditious in their philosophy. Even though Mill himself is routinely considered radical for his time, he criticizes his forerunners for overstepping the boundaries about what needed to be changed in government and the social order. To Mill, their introduction of new methods of using reason to understand the world around them was certainly a positive development; however he sees them as too pessimistic in their approach. In using this rational calculation to help them comprehend their world, they failed to appreciate what wisdom the past had already provided, and at the same time, dismissed other faculties of man Mill saw as natural, such as passion, religious feeling, and other emotional influences. He says that they only saw the flaws of society; that which was not true, but nothing of what was.¹² To Mill, Bentham was "the chief subversive thinker of an age which has long lost all that they could subvert."¹³ Essentially, he admires Coleridge and his school of Romantics because he agrees with much of what they advocate. The Enlightenment had pointed out many problems in society. Moreover, it took to a form of negative logic;

¹¹ Mill, "Coleridge," 179-80.

¹² Mill, "Coleridge," 199.

¹³ Mill, "Bentham," 136.

pointing out weaknesses, without asserting positive truths.¹⁴ Having steadily gained success and appreciation for their ideas, they began to criticize everything about society, whether merited or not. Though romantic thought in many ways developed as an outgrowth of the Enlightenment, it generally saw itself as reacting against Enlightenment ideals. Mill is not only sympathetic to this reaction, but deems it necessary.

For this reason, Mill commends Coleridge and other Romantics for having contributed a great deal to philosophy. Romantics saw themselves as struggling against the dominant modes of thought, and responded with a return to thinking about tradition, history, poetry, and a specific emphasis on the notion of the great “genius.” The “genius” is an oft-praised trope in Romantic thought. William Wordsworth, for instance, who published a collection of poetry with Coleridge, writes in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* about how the poet is the true genius, saying that “the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society.”¹⁵ To him, the poet, who can see beyond rational calculation, is the one who is really capable of understanding the world. In this case Mill does not simply admire the Romantics, but resembles them. In *On Liberty*, he says, “I insist thus emphatically on the importance of genius and the necessity of allowing it to unfold itself freely . . .”¹⁶ He continues, explaining that the genius is a rare figure, capable of bringing advancement to society. To Mill, most of humankind is mediocre. Therefore, the genius should be encouraged to grow and develop his mind, as this individuality what really does serve the progress of humanity.¹⁷ One of the central premises of *On Liberty*,

¹⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 43.

¹⁵ William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” *European Romanticism: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Warren Breckman (St. Martin’s: Bedford, 2007), 70.

¹⁶ Mill, *On Liberty*, 62.

¹⁷ Mill, *On Liberty*, 61-63.

indeed, is the importance of the freedom of expression, allowing for creative intellectual conflict and the questioning of norms. Mill's dialogue with Romantic writers regarding the figure of the "genius" demonstrates a vested interest in creativity, feeling, and self-expression; a striking departure from the predominant image of Mill as the consummate Utilitarian.

Even more surprising than Mill's appreciation of the Romantic reaction however, is how closely some of his criticisms of the Enlightenment *philosophes* resemble those of Edmund Burke to the leaders of the French Revolution. In 1790, Burke published one of the founding texts of conservatism, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Among other things, Burke argues that a complete revolution and dissolution of the old form of government was unnecessary. He believes that the traditions of established institutions are important, and that citizens do not have the right to completely subvert them at will. If something is wrong with those institutions;

... the change is to be confined to the peccant part only; to the part which produced the necessary deviation; and even then it is to be effected without a decomposition of the whole civil and political mass, for the purpose of originating a new civil order out of the first elements of society.¹⁸

Mill betrays similar thoughts in his essays on Coleridge and Bentham. Bentham, he says, simply dismissed aristocracies or priests of old simply as selfish interests. Coleridge, on the other hand, saw beyond that; "he considered the long or extensive prevalence of any opinion as a presumption that it was not altogether a fallacy ... [there was] at least proof of an adaptation in it to some portion or other of the human mind."¹⁹ In fact, this is one of the chief contributions he sees coming from Coleridge. Enlightenment writers were correct in

¹⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, 21.

¹⁹ Mill, "Coleridge," 178.

that there was a great deal of corruption in the institutions of civil society. Coleridge understood that behind these corruptions were essential basic truths about human nature and how society operates; after all, the institutions did not develop in a vacuum. Mill thus criticizes the philosophers of the eighteenth century: “they threw away the shell without preserving the kernel.”²⁰ Throughout his texts on Bentham and Coleridge, he repeatedly states that the Enlightenment philosophers had subverted too much, and that Coleridge and other Romantics contributed vital insights to philosophy with their reactions. Indeed, Mill responds to the eighteenth century much in the same way as Burke did to the French Revolution. Even with his liberal ideas about freedom and humanity, close reading of Mill demonstrates an unexpected reactionary impulse.

Taken together, Mill’s criticisms of the philosophers of the Enlightenment seem to center around the conviction that one single idea or group should not be allowed to become completely dominant in any society. In taking away power from aristocratic governments, he fears that a “tyranny of the majority” will prevail and come to suppress individual expression. A majority of radicals dominating policy is no better than a group of aristocrats; as Mill explains in his essay on Bentham, “though to pass from one form of bad government to another be the ordinary fate of mankind, philosophers ought not to make themselves parties to it, by sacrificing one portion of important truth to another.”²¹ Mill believes that these *philosophes* had “abused their victory” over the previous form of government, in attempting to impose their views on the whole of society.²² He demonstrates this concern throughout *On Liberty*. As early as the Introduction, Mill

²⁰ Mill, “Coleridge,” 198.

²¹ Mill, “Bentham,” 168.

²² Mill, “Coleridge,” 184.

explains that it is not enough for society to be protected from a ruler, but “there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose . . . its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them.”²³ In order to protect individual liberty, Mill believes governments should only limit people inasmuch as they threaten to do harm to others; he sees no other instance in which government should suppress the individual.²⁴ As one of the overarching themes of this text, Mill clearly is preoccupied with concern over any group in society having too much power over the individual, whose rights Mill values over those of any other group or entity.

All in all, John Stuart Mill may be much more complex than initially meets the eye. Stemming in part from his relationship with his father and his harsh upbringing, Mill values the importance of human emotions, feelings of religion and morality, and aesthetics as motivating factors as much as he does rational calculation and scientific reasoning. Further, like the Romantics, Mill believes the Enlightenment philosophers went too far, in wanting to remove all remnants of the past from society. They ignored the fact that some institutions, while they may have become corrupt, had fundamental principles which should be preserved. Mill seems to be quite a contradictory figure: a liberal, but critical of his liberal predecessors. Indeed, he viewed the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, not only as having value but as a necessity. He even recalls Edmund Burke, a de-facto conservative, in his criticisms of Enlightenment philosophers. His primary concern is apparent: that this recent Enlightenment philosophy has come to dominate society, doing exactly what it criticized its predecessor as doing. Mill values individual liberty above all

²³ Mill, *On Liberty*, 4.

²⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 53.

else; in this he was indeed radical for his time. While some Romantic and even some conservative impulses temper Mill's Utilitarianism, his concern for the individual liberty runs constant throughout his writings. No matter what he is discussing, the anxiety he feels for personal freedom is paramount. In this way, Mill is unique in his age, combining the positive elements he sees in a variety of schools; but placing individual liberty as paramount in his political philosophy.

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