



BOOK REVIEW

Don A. Habibi, *John Stuart Mill and the Ethic of Human Growth*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, 289 pp. (indexed). ISBN 0-7923-6854-1, EUR 110; US\$ 96.00; GB£ 67.00 (Hb).

Don Habibi's main claim in *John Stuart Mill and the Ethic of Human Growth* is that "Mill's belief in human improvement is the key for understanding his work" and represents "the major unifying theme of his life" (p. vii). Habibi sets out his argument in four parts, "Introduction," "Values," "Applications" and "Conclusions," each containing two chapters. Only the last part is entirely new. The other parts contain previously published material.

While Habibi is "not suggesting that [Mill's] conception of growth is overlooked entirely," he believes that "Mill's conception of growth *in toto* and its prominence in his thought remains an under-explored topic" (p. 2). What, then, is Mill's "conception of growth *in toto*?" Habibi concedes that "at no point does [Mill] offer a clear definition articulating what he meant by [growth]" (p. 26). Habibi says that he himself uses "the word 'growth' as an umbrella term," and that Mill's "general idea of human growth is expressed by his use of such terms as change, upward movement, human advancement, progress, self-examination, (self-) development, development of potential, (self-) improvement, edification, betterment, cultivation, self-formation, ideal nobleness of character, perfectibility, and perfection," and although these are "not synonymous, they bear a strong 'family resemblance'" (p. 27). Thus, Habibi uses the word 'growth' "as a convenience, for it captures the essence of what all these terms have in common" (p. 27).

Readers may be forgiven for feeling some doubt about Habibi's position early on in the book. How could a so-called concept of growth this imprecise help to clarify anything at all? Habibi goes on to explain his notion of growth with help of analogies from gardening. "The importance of altering nature is as obvious to Mill as it is to the gardener who knows that watering, fertilizing, spraying and pruning a tree might be necessary for promoting its healthful growth and usefulness" (p. 29). But even though "one could say that a tree is growing in a bad location or that it is growing old . . . it is far more common to think of growth as a good thing. . . . For the purpose of this study, 'growth' will refer to good growth; that is, I consider it as desirable and positive" (p. 31). But an argument is needed to show that growth, however it is defined, is desirable in the first place. Habibi claims that for Mill, "growth is good because

it makes essential contributions to well-being,” that it is “akin to von Humboldt’s Hellenistic, Germanic concept of *Bildung*” and “also akin to Aristotle’s conception of happiness” (pp. 31–32). Does Habibi simply define “growth” to contain everything that is desirable? It is often claimed that Mill defines the concept of happiness in this manner. Habibi’s thesis is ambiguous, to say the least.

Habibi accepts such criticisms against Mill by Richard P. Anschutz, John Plamenatz, Alan Ryan, Francis W. Garforth, and others, but explains that “in the few instances where Mill does define key terms, he draws a great deal of criticism for offering definitions that are inadequate and inconsistent” (p. 47). Yet Habibi does nothing to clarify what Mill means by “growth.” Given the above criticisms, this is surely what can be legitimately expected from an author who claims to show that Mill’s work is best understood through his views on growth.

But Habibi does not concede this point. He claims that Mill’s elusiveness was strategically motivated: “Had he formulated a particular agenda for the advancement of society, it could quickly have become outdated” (p. 47). Beside the fact that “formulating a particular agenda for the advancement of society” is different from having a clear conception of what growth for a society would consist in, Mill repeatedly does offer particular agendas for social advancement, for instance, in *On the Subjection of Women*. Perhaps Habibi wants us to believe that his own elusiveness is strategically motivated. However, Habibi does not present any evidence to support his claim that Mill’s equivocations are strategically motivated, nor would strategic elusiveness on Habibi’s part be an acceptable strategy, given his aim of clarifying Mill’s work. Mill’s sloppiness may be acceptable, but Habibi’s is not.

Habibi’s claims take somewhat clearer shape in the later chapters. In Chapter Three he argues that the growth aspect is what distinguishes Mill’s utilitarianism from Bentham’s. The fact that Mill does not offer much explanation of what he means by ‘higher pleasures’ “has led to misinterpretations, especially when scholars overlook or reject his identification of higher happiness with growth” (p. 76). While Habibi does not manage to give a developed account of how Mill’s distinction between quality and quantity does characterize the growth ethic, he makes a good case that Mill put more emphasis on the cultivation of the individual than Bentham did. But even this is old news. In commenting on Chapter Three, it should be noted that Habibi makes a number of clearly mistaken assertions about the economic meaning of “ordinal utility” and “cardinal utility,” and the scope and object of decision and game theory.

Chapters Four through Six deal with Mill’s position as a positive or negative liberal, the need for paternalism, and Mill’s role as colonial administrator in the East India Company. Habibi argues that Mill was not, as he says Isaiah Berlin claimed, exclusively concerned with freedom from constraints, but that

Mill held a triadic conception of liberty in the style of Gerald MacCallum, freedom of someone from something to do something. Habibi's work here is less comprehensive than Bruce Baum's recently published study, *Rereading Power and Freedom in J.S. Mill*. The brief Chapter Five is a good exposition of Mill's position on education. Habibi rebuts the claim that Mill thought poorly of children, or had little regard for their welfare. In Chapter Six, Habibi argues that Mill's work in the East India Company was motivated by the desire to improve the Indian subcontinent, but he sees Mill as a product of his time in his objectionable eurocentrism.

In the final two chapters, Habibi raises some doubts about Mill's optimistic view of human nature. The use commonly made of the liberties in many Western nations does not seem to support Mill's hope that moral progress can be achieved by extending personal liberties. If this is due to a weakness in human nature, more extensive paternalism could be a more efficient means to secure the utilitarian end of the maximum of happiness. Mill also holds a theory of learning, associationism, that today is widely regarded as simplistic. These are important points that Habibi could have treated in more detail.

In summary, Habibi's book is well-researched and written in an engaging style, but its main thesis is not as well developed as it ought to be.

Christoph Schmidt-Petri
Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method
London School of Economics and Political Science
London WC2A 2AE
England

