

Mill's Liberal Feminism: Its Legacy and Current Criticism

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ABSTRACT: This paper highlights John Stuart Mill's views on the problem of gender equality as expressed in *The Subjection of Women*, which is commonly regarded as one of the core texts of Enlightenment liberal feminism of the 19th century. In this paper, the author outlines the historical context of both Mill's views and his personal biography, which influenced his argumentation for the emancipation of women, and considers Mill's utilitarianism and liberalism, as the main philosophical background for his criticism of social conditions that subordinated women. She reflects on some of the philosopher's ideas and arguments for equality and friendship between women and men which may still be considered noteworthy and relevant. Attention is also given to the main lines of contemporary reception of Mill's liberal feminism from the perspective of current feminist philosophy, within which certain critical views predominate. Despite some problematic points in Mill's considerations, his essay on women's subjection may be regarded as one of the philosophically most interesting conceptions of liberal feminist thinking.

KEYWORDS: Equality, feminism, gender, liberalism, philosophy.

John Stuart Mill as Feminist: Biographical Context

Although contemporary feminist reflection on the tradition of European philosophical thinking is quite heterogeneous and richly differentiated, among the common features found in most feminist re-readings of the philosophical canon is their critical attitude with regard not only to the historical exclusion of women from philosophy, but also, and perhaps more commonly, to certain negative characterisations of women or the feminine found therein, the explicit misogyny of some great philosophers (such as Aristotle's description of the female as a deformed male), and various

forms of sexism and androcentrism identifiable in the Western philosophical canon. Of course, considering the extreme diversity of what we call “the philosophical canon”, any universalising judgement would clearly represent a simplification. Nonetheless, it seems that it is hardly possible to name more than a few figures in the history of philosophy, from the ancient Greeks up to the present, who have contributed positively to an analysis of the issues surrounding women’s (subordinated) position in society, or who have advocated gender equality as one of the main principles of social justice. John Stuart Mill can be considered one of the very few exceptions to the androcentric character of Western philosophy, one who stands out from a long tradition that tended more to devalue and marginalise women and issues concerning relations between the sexes, or to keep silent about them, than to develop philosophical ideas and explanations regarding women’s subordination and consider gender issues based on the principle of the equality of women and men.

John Stuart Mill considered this to be one of the most fundamental principles for building a liberal and democratic society. His interest in the emancipation of women was systematic and continuous. It is also very important to note that he worked on this issue not only theoretically and philosophically, but also as a publicist and politician. As is well known, Mill was not a typical academic philosopher and scientist, and did not regard his activities as mere theorising. Rather, he was a “public man”, an enthusiastic participant in public and political debates concerning various social problems of his time, and was especially interested in legal and social reform. Among the issues on which Mill campaigned most intensively were women’s rights, women’s suffrage and women’s equal access to education. From the latter half of the 1850s until his death, he actively supported the women’s movement as it developed during this period, and participated in various forms of women’s political struggle against subjection and discrimination and for civil and political rights, especially women’s suffrage, as well as social and political reforms aimed at improving their situation. He cooperated and regularly corresponded with several women’s rights activists, including Elisabeth C. Stanton, leader of the first organised women’s movement in the USA and author of the famous *Declaration of Sentiments* of 1848, a manifesto articulating the demand for equality between the sexes. During his brief political career as a member of British parliament (he became a member of the House of Commons in 1865), Mill worked to influence legislation and public policy concerning issues affecting women; for example, he fought for a women’s suffrage amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867, and also supported the Married Women’s Property Bill one year later. He was critical of the idea

that husbands, through their right to vote, served as the protectors of their wives; for him, women's enfranchisement signified the greater struggle for women's equality.

In the literature devoted to Mill, it is commonly held that his criticism of patriarchy, his ideas about the emancipation of women, and his feminism are closely related to his personal relationship with Harriet Taylor and her thoughts on these issues. Although there is much disagreement regarding the impact of Taylor's ideas on Mill, and especially about the merit and value of her influence on Mill's feminism (some authors view Taylor's influence on Mill in a positive light, others see it as damaging), no one denies that Mill and Taylor greatly affected each other's thinking. Mill attests to the common nature of his and Taylor's work in the following words:

When two persons have their thoughts and speculations completely in common; when all subjects of intellectual or moral interest are discussed between them in daily life, and probed to much greater depths than are usually or conveniently sounded in writings intended for general readers; when they set out from the same principles, and arrive at their conclusions by processes pursued jointly, it is of little consequence in respect to the question of originality, which of them holds the pen; the one who contributes least to the composition may contribute most to the thought; the writings which result are the joint product of both, and it must often be impossible to disentangle their respective parts, and affirm that this belongs to one and that to the other. (Mill, 1981: 251)

The joint nature of their writings is important for our understanding of the context of their philosophical ideas. The extraordinary relationship between Mill and Taylor shaped not only their personal lives, but also the priorities of their thoughts and writings. They met in 1830, when Harriet was married to John Taylor. Her intimate friendship with Mill was a source of much criticism; the restrictiveness of Victorian morality made their relationship suspect. Their disgust at the ostracism they faced due to their close relationship may be recognised in the criticism of cultural conformity in *On Liberty*. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill discusses the situation of an intelligent woman confined by patriarchal institutions and customs that deny her individuality (see also Eisenstein, 1981: 114). Through his relationship with Taylor, Mill reached the strong conviction that women's suffrage was an essential step towards the moral improvement of humankind, and that the relationship between husband and wife had to be grounded in legal as well as real equality – that “marital slavery” should be replaced by “marital friendship”. In 1851, two years after John Taylor's death, Mill and Harriet Taylor were married, subsequently

working together on Mill's *Autobiography* and *On Liberty*. Harriet died only seven years after their marriage, and *The Subjection of Women* was published after her death.

Mill on the Subjection of Women

Mill formulates the fundamental argument of *The Subjection of Women* in its first paragraph:

[T]he principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and [...] ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (Mill, 1984: 261)

Mill's criticism of the social status of women is based on his analysis of the social injustice excluding women from public and civil life, from politics and decision-making. He stresses that this kind of social injustice is one of the main barriers to human progress and the moral improvement of humankind. Analysing the consequences of women's subjugation, he points out that such conditions negatively affect not only the lives of women, but of men as well. Men and women alike are harmed by such a situation, and consequently the subjection of women negatively affects the whole of society. As a liberal thinker, Mill expresses his strong conviction that the subordination of women, which deprives them of freedom, is an unjust violation of the principle of liberty. Moreover, it is a historical anachronism, "an isolated fact in modern social institutions [...], a single relic of an old world of thought and practice exploded in everything else, but retained in the one thing of most universal interest" (Mill, 1984: 275); and Mill declares that this "relic of the past is discordant with the future, and must necessarily disappear" (Mill, 1984: 272). He locates the origin of women's oppression in men's physical strength, assuming that the more influence reason has in a society, the less importance physical strength will have. In such a state of affairs, women would no longer be disadvantaged, as physical strength becomes less important as civilisation progresses. This progress implies the development of reason which, according to Mill, is the same in either sex. Hence the subjection of women in an advanced society has no other basis than habit or custom, both of which are serious hindrances to the full development of reason. In this way, Mill conceptualises human life as progressing from the passionate and the natural to the rational and the cultural.

Mill views the problem of women's status in society – the problem of their subjection – in the context of his philosophical belief in general

human progress, in general human advancement and prosperity. Any inequality represents a serious barrier to the advancement of an entire society, and is also an obstacle to progress on an individual level, that is, to individual improvement and prosperity. Precisely this is Mill's point of departure in arguing for the need to dismantle social and legal relationships that subjugate women and establish perfect equality and partnership between the sexes, in both the public and private spheres.

Today Mill is commonly viewed as the most important representative of Enlightenment liberal feminism, and no doubt this essay on women's subjection is the most persuasive piece of liberal feminist thinking. However, some of his views are more similar to certain radical feminist ideas developed within "second-wave feminism". For example, in exploring the question of the causes and motives for which unequal relations between men and women are maintained, Mill claims that, apart from established customs and general sentiments, it is in the interest of men to keep women in their subjugated position. The exclusion of women from public life is the result of men's will to "maintain their subordination in domestic life, because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal" (Mill, 1984: 299). When speaking about women's status, especially in the family and marriage, he often uses the image of slavery: a wife "is the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called" (Mill, 1984: 284). Mill considers marriage, or more precisely the marital law of his society, as the main factor in generating, perpetuating and enforcing women's slavery. In his view, women are in a double bind: they are not free within marriage, and they are not free not to marry. This lack of freedom not to marry results from the fact that they cannot acquire education or earn money in the public sphere. Thus there is strong social and economic pressure to marry: law and custom dictate that a woman has scarcely any available means of gaining a livelihood, except as a wife and mother.

Mill's reflections on women's status within marriage contain not only this critical moment, but also some constructive ones. He outlines a vision of marital partnership based on the principles of equality, partnership, cooperation and reciprocity between woman and man, and stresses that only such a relationship between married persons is acceptable, not only in a political but also in a moral sense:

The equality of married persons before the law, is not only the sole mode in which that particular relation can be made consistent with justice to both sides, and conducive to the happiness of both, but it is the only means of rendering the daily life of mankind, in any high sense, a school of moral cultivation. (Mill, 1984: 294)

Despite the fact that Mill concentrates primarily on legal conditions and legislation, he is also well aware that women's position in marriage and their status in public life are interconnected. Accordingly, he believes that marital relations based on partnership and equality would transform not only the domestic but also the public sphere. His reflections on the relationship between the public and private world also "emphasised the extent to which the rights-bearing individual of much liberal political thought is constituted in important ways by intimate as well as public relationships" (Shanley, 2000: 398). Mill offers plenty of arguments to discredit prejudices against women's entry into the public world – the world of higher education, paid labour and politics – and to demonstrate the necessity of making all occupations and public positions accessible to women as well as men. In accordance with his liberal political and philosophical convictions, he maintains that the very principle of justice requires that women possess the same rights as men, and that equality before the law will lead to justice in all spheres of social and political life.

Mill's analysis of the subjection of women in society clearly reveals his utilitarian position, as well as his participation in the English liberal tradition. The situation of one half of humankind, which he describes in terms of subjection, oppression and slavery, is not only in sharp contrast with the principle of equality and individual freedom. It is also a serious obstacle to social and individual improvement, to prosperity and happiness: the subjection of women "dries up [...] the principal fountain of human happiness, and leaves the species less rich, to an inappreciable degree, in all that makes life valuable to the human being" (Mill, 1984: 340). Mill justifies the necessity of women's emancipation mainly by the need to create room for each individual (which means not only men, but also women) to develop their personal inclinations and talents, so as to realise the maximum of their personal happiness and, as a consequence, contribute to the development of the whole of society. It is not difficult to identify the utilitarian principle of maximum happiness in the background of such argumentation; for it is the well-being of the maximum number of people which Mill uses to demonstrate the disutility of women's oppression and exclusion from public life. Other principles which are central to his argumentation are the liberal principle of equality and freedom, the principle of equal opportunities, and the principle of free individual choice. Accordingly, since human beings are equal, the fact that someone is born a woman should not determine her lifelong position and status in society, and neither philosophy nor customs should "ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy, any more that to be born black instead of white, or a commoner instead of a nobleman, shall decide the person's position

through all life” (Mill, 1984: 274). It may be said that this idea represents one of the most fundamental assumptions of liberal feminist theory to this very day. As for Mill's strategy, it may be said that he, like Harriet Taylor, wanted to extend the ideology of liberal individualism to women; for both of them sought to secure an independent, autonomous identity for women as distinct individuals (on Mill's liberal individualism, see also Eisenstein, 1981: 113–145). In short, Mill's argumentation is bound to two fundamental assumptions or theses, which permeate his thoughts throughout the whole essay. According to the first, the equality of women before the law is an imperative proceeding from the very principle of social justice. The second consists in his thesis regarding the social utility of eliminating the oppression of women, not only for them but for society as a whole. These two assumptions are joined into one thesis of fundamental importance, according to which the inequality of women and men is unjust as well as harmful, both for individuals (individual women and men) and for society:

This interweaving of the principle of justice that dictates women's rights to equality before the law and of the principle of utility that anticipates social benefits to follow from overturning relationships of domination and subordination recurs repeatedly in *The Subjection of Women*. (Shanley, 2000: 400)

In this context, the question of the compatibility of these two principles may arise, and it might also be asked which of the two Mill considers more important. I think that these two principles are equally important for Mill; but what is more remarkable is the way in which he combines them when examining the advantages of improving women's status for the whole of society. His question *cui bono?* and the answers he gives are, in some sense, highly similar to the arguments found in contemporary discourse on, for example, women's representation in politics or decision-making positions. When speaking of these issues, it is very common to appeal to the usefulness of a higher representation of women in politics, arguing that they could bring to this sphere different values or attitudes, and that this is the main reason why we should wish to see them more highly represented. Of course, in Mill's case an orientation towards utility is understandable in the context of his utilitarianism; yet I still think that this kind of argumentation presents some difficulties. Should we aim at a higher representation of women in politics only because we expect them to do politics differently, thus producing positive changes in society at large? The main problem I see with this kind of thinking is that it tacitly presupposes that each individual woman is a representative of her sex and femininity (primarily a conventionally conceived femininity).

Many of Mill's views on women's social position and status are relevant today; this is true even from the viewpoint of current feminist philosophy. These include Mill's thoughts on issues like the source of women's subjection, the difference between women and men, the origins and nature of such differences, and so on. Although I cannot agree with everything which Mill says on these issues, I believe his philosophical argumentation is still worthy of consideration. For example, with regard to the thesis (found even in contemporary discourse) that the experience of mankind confirms the existing social order and the current gender arrangement, Mill points out that experience "cannot possibly have decided between two courses, so long as there has only been experience of one" (Mill, 1984: 276).

In accordance with his liberal social and political philosophy, Mill stresses the similarities between women and men, rather than their differences, emphasising that "any of the mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are but the natural effect of the differences in their education and circumstances, and indicate no radical difference, far less radical inferiority, of nature" (Mill, 1984: 302). Mill argues that any gap in intellectual achievement between men and women can be explained by the better education and privileged social position which men enjoy. On the other hand, he endeavours to emphasise and positively evaluate the importance of those mental or behavioural traits of women which supposedly differ from men's. For example, while arguing for women's suffrage and their representation in public life, he suggests that "the general bent of their talents is towards the practical" (Mill, 1984: 304), thus making them fit for a life of public action. He frequently refers to women's (present) characteristics to support his call for eliminating barriers to their participation in public life. It seems that Mill's reflections on this issue are not unambiguous: they oscillate between the classical liberal position, within which equality is mainly regarded as based on sameness, and a position which was more distinctly articulated approximately one hundred years later by second-wave feminism, i.e. the theory of sexual difference. However, it should be stressed that with regard to the question of women's emancipation and gender equality, Mill's position is clearly a liberal one.

Likewise still relevant is Mill's criticism of traditional opinions regarding women's and men's proper place in society – opinions which are deeply rooted in European culture and "mass feeling". In this context, Mill stresses the importance of analysing such opinions and feelings or, to use the current terminology, gender stereotypes, yet at the same time is well aware of how difficult it is to argue against them. As if debating with an imaginary opponent, a supporter of "the established custom and the gen-

eral feeling” (Mill, 1984: 263) with regard to the natural place of women and men and the natural character of the inequality existing between them, Mill presents abundant arguments to undermine such opinions, emphasising that “custom, however universal it may be, affords in this case no presumption, and ought not to create any prejudice, in favour of the arrangements which place women in social and political subjection to men” (Mill, 1984: 272).

In Victorian England as well as in our own society, one repeatedly encounters a kind of justification of the differing social position of women and men which claims that this is due to their “nature”, to their (supposedly) natural characteristics and dispositions. With regard to this issue, I think it appropriate to quote a slightly longer passage from Mill’s essay:

Neither does it avail anything to say that the nature of the two sexes adapts them to their present functions and positions, and renders these appropriate to them. Standing on the ground of common sense and the constitution of the human mind, I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. If men had ever been found in society without women, or women without men, or if there had been a society of men and women in which the women were not under the control of the men, something might have been positively known about the mental and moral differences which may be inherent in the nature of each. What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. (Mill, 1984: 277)

Here Mill not only calls attention to the impossibility of knowing the “nature” of women; for what we now call the nature or natural traits of women is the result of culturally determined factors such as socialisation and education and the effect of the social circumstances in which women live. He also unmasks the falsity and delusiveness of any argument based on the premise of “natural” mental or moral differences. For if men really believed, as they say they do, that a woman’s natural vocation is that of wife and mother, they would not erect barriers to prevent women from doing anything else. Mill’s observation that “the knowledge which men can acquire of women [...] is wretchedly imperfect and superficial, and always will be so, until women themselves have told all that they have to tell” (Mill, 1984: 278) still sounds remarkable today. When current feminist philosophers and theorists invoke women’s voices, when they call on women to articulate their experiences and their lives, we hear an echo of John Stuart Mill and his view that the issue of difference between the sexes is “a subject on which nothing final can be known, so long as those who alone can really know it, women themselves, have given but little testimony, and that little, mostly suborned” (Mill, 1984: 278).

Current Feminist Reflections on Mill's Views

While Mill's opinions on the subjection of women and his strong criticism of the social arrangement which subordinates them were widely accepted by his feminist contemporaries and the leaders of the women's suffrage movement, the reception of Mill's liberal feminism in contemporary feminist philosophy has been more variable. Critical voices regarding some of his views may also be heard. These I would summarise in the following points:

1. One of the main targets in current criticism of Mill's liberal feminism is his universalist and, at the same time, biased view of human life and human nature. As already mentioned, Mill conceptualises human life as progressing from the passionate and the natural to the rational and the cultural. However, since the Western philosophical tradition conceives of men as typifying the rational and the cultural, then within this conceptual framework women, if they are to progress, must become like men. This is partly due to the androcentric biases inherent in philosophical accounts of reason and culture, which is evident in the assumptions made by philosophers concerning which activities qualify as rational and cultural. The implicit associations between maleness, reason and culture, on the one hand, and femaleness, passion and nature, on the other, must be made explicit if they are to be challenged. As Moira Gatens shows, Mill's failure to take this step might have been caused by his commitment to a philosophical paradigm which is (in the aforementioned sense) inherently masculine. In examining the recommendations made by Mill (and also Harriet Taylor) concerning what women's place and function in society ought to be, Gatens argues that "the failure of liberal principles – as Mill and Taylor present them – to meet the problem of women's subjection is rooted in their universalist view of human nature" (Gatens, 1991: 29). Moreover, because Mill's central argument for the emancipation and education of women is based on the necessity of intellectual progress among men, which, in his view, cannot occur unless women also progress, such argumentation thus favours women's emancipation because the progress of the human race depends on it. In this regard, Gatens stresses that Mill is not concerned with the emancipation of women *per se*, but rather with the benefits that would be brought to mankind by a change in how women perform their traditional tasks (Gatens, 1991: 30, 39).

2. The second main target in contemporary feminist criticism of Mill concerns his views on women's domestic functions, which he considers "natural"; for example, he describes women's childbearing and childrearing capacities as an "animal function". Mill does not escape the traditional (masculinist) view that assigns women's traditional work and activities

to the domain of nature, a domain which, in Mill's view, is to be progressively overcome or "amended" by rational activities. The kinds of activities in which women have traditionally been involved in the domestic sphere are seen as part of the animal world, as something that falls outside of culture. Some contemporary feminist philosophers have pointed to this as an evident masculinist bias in Mill's thought.

3. The third target in contemporary feminist criticism of Mill is his acceptance of the traditional gender-based division of labour within the family. Namely, he assumes that equality before the law will eliminate the subjection of women and guarantee their equality with men, even if traditional gender roles remain intact. Although Mill criticises women's status as wives and mothers and condemns the injustice of marital slavery, his views on marriage show certain limits to his liberal feminism. He does not attack traditional assumptions regarding women's and men's different responsibilities in a household, and accepts the notion that when women marry they should be responsible for taking care of the home and children, while men provide the family income:

Like a man when he chooses a profession, so, when a woman marries, it may in general be understood that she makes choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a family [...]; and that she renounces, not all other objects and occupations, but all which are not consistent with the requirements of this. (Mill, 1984: 237)

It might seem curious – given his high regard for women's intellectual abilities and his admission that women's duties as wives and mothers prevent them from succeeding in professions – that Mill still believes even the most liberated woman would continue to choose the family over other competing activities. By accepting the traditional gender-based division of labour in the private sphere in his discussion of family life, he seems to forget his own observation that women are subjugated not only by law, but also by customs and general feelings. As Susan Okin argues, "Mill never questioned or objected to the maintenance of traditional sex roles within the family, but expressly considered them to be suitable and desirable" (Okin, 1979: 237). It would seem that his emphasis on the importance of legal and political equality, on equality before the law, makes him less sensitive to other forms of inequality and discrimination. Several paragraphs in Mill's essay offer strong evidence for such a criticism, and he often writes as if all that were necessary to eliminate women's subordinate status is to provide them with equal legal rights and equal opportunities. However, as the historical development of the women's movement and feminism demonstrate, it is clear that equal rights and equal opportunities

are the necessary but not the sufficient conditions of women's emancipation. In this sense, current criticism of Mill's overoptimistic and quite naïve views is legitimate. On the other hand, we need to recognise, as Shanley points out, that Mill's ultimate solution for ending the subjection of women was not equal opportunity, but spousal friendship; he regarded equal opportunity as a means whereby such friendship could be encouraged.

Another important issue worth noting concerns the compatibility of the principle of equality, which Mill so strongly emphasises, and his acceptance of the traditional gender-based division of labour within the family. According to the interpretation offered by Shanley,

Mill's commitment to equality in marriage was stronger, and of a different theoretical order, than his acceptance of a continued sexual division of labour. On the one hand, Mill's belief in the necessity of equality as a precondition to marital friendship was a profound theoretical tenet. It rested on the normative assumption that human relationships between equals were of a higher, more enriching order than those between unequals [...]. On the other hand, his belief that friendship could be attained and sustained while women bore nearly exclusive responsibility for the home was a statement that might be modified or even abandoned if experience proved it to be wrong. (Shanley, 2000: 416–417)

Mill considered the principle of equality to be a moral imperative, while the division of labour was an empirical matter, one which might be altered according to actual conditions and experience. Whether we accept such an interpretation, or adopt a more critical stance regarding Mill's thinking, in my view there is no doubt that *The Subjection of Women* may be regarded as the most important and influential contribution to Enlightenment feminist theory. In many ways Mill transcended his own time, and many of his views are still relevant today. His conception of gender equality as articulated in this essay remains one of the philosophically most interesting formulations of liberal feminist thought.

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