

Penultimate version of “John Stuart Mill,” in *Nineteenth Century British and American Philosophy*, eds. Jennifer Keefe and Kipton Jensen, part of the new *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* (Schwabe Verlag, forthcoming)

PLEASE CITE PUBLISHED VERSION -- draft: 11/12/2023

7. John Stuart Mill¹

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1. Life. - 2. Work. - 3. Philosophy. - 4. Impact. - 5. Bibliography.

1. LIFE

John Stuart Mill was born in London on 20 May 1806, the eldest child of Harriet (Burrow) Mill (1782-1854) and James Mill (1773-1836), a disciple of the utilitarian system-builder Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Mill’s strict education under his father gave him a comprehensive training in classical languages, literature, history, philosophy, social sciences, natural sciences, math, and logic. By his late teens, he was active among the “philosophic radicals” advocating for liberal and democratic political reforms. In 1823, Mill began a civil service career in the East India Company. In 1830, he fell in love with Harriet Taylor (1807-1858), a married woman, and they developed a close personal and intellectual partnership. During the 1840s he wrote two treatises, *A System of Logic* and *Principles of Political Economy*, that established his philosophical reputation. After the death of Taylor’s husband, she and Mill married in 1851. Taylor died in 1858, the same year Mill retired from the civil service with the dissolution of the East India Company. In the 1850s and 1860s, Mill published enduring works in moral and political philosophy, including *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, *Considerations on Representative Government*, and *The Subjection of Women*. He was widely regarded as the preeminent English-speaking philosopher of his time, and he corresponded with leading minds from many countries. Mill also served a single term as a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom (1865-1868), where he is remembered for proposing an amendment to give voting rights to women and for leading a campaign to hold Governor Eyre accountable for rights violations against Black Jamaicans. He failed in both attempts and lost his seat. In the press, he was alternately revered and ridiculed for his public campaigns on behalf of women’s equality, workers’ rights, the North in the American Civil War, and other egalitarian

¹ [Draft note: For comments on earlier drafts, I am grateful to Meredith Gehrlich, Sahar Heydari Fard, Kathryn Joyce, Jenny Keefe, Eric MacGilvray, Christopher Macleod, Helen McCabe, Christopher Pincock, Naomi Scheinerman, Michael Schefczyk, Lilly Osburg, Christoph Schmidt-Petri, and Winston Thompson.]

causes. His death on 8 May 1873 from erysipelas made front page news in the *New York Times* and other publications. He is buried with Taylor in Avignon, France.

2. WORK

Mill's *Collected Works* comprises thirty-three volumes, including annotated editions of his major books, essays, correspondence, and assorted other writings. It is difficult to overstate Mill's influence within moral and political philosophy. He is both the progenitor of a progressive form of utilitarianism and arguably the central figure in the liberal egalitarian political tradition. His main books on these subjects include *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), *On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1861), *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), and *The Subjection of Women* (1869). These are supplemented by important essays and illuminating correspondence on related topics. Mill is routinely invoked in public discussions of well-being, liberty, paternalism, freedom of expression, social diversity, and women's rights. In academic circles, he also continues to inform debates about the nature of happiness, representative government, property rights, steady-state economics, and socialism.

Beyond moral and political subjects, Mill also made significant contributions in the empiricist tradition to epistemology, scientific method, metaphysics, and philosophy of language. His main works on theoretical philosophy include *A System of Logic* (1843), *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865), an annotated edition of James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1869), and *Three Essays on Religion*, published posthumously in 1874. Mill sought to counteract the dominant a priori or intuitionist philosophy by showing that all scientific knowledge is grounded in immediate experience and inductive inference. From his father, he adopted psychological associationism, which explains all mental phenomena in terms of complex relations of sensations and ideas of sensations. His account of external reality committed him to a non-theistic variant of Berkeleyan empiricism that invoked the "permanent possibilities [or potentialities] of sensation" (Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 183-185; Mill, *Berkeley's Life and Writings*, 459-461; *A System of Logic*, 56-62; Macleod 2024). On religious matters, he remained skeptical of supernatural explanations throughout his life and was deeply impressed by the problem of evil given so much suffering in the history of the world (Mill, *Theism*, 453; Mill, *Nature*, 388-391; Mill, *Utility of Religion*, 423-425). Despite what he saw as the stifling influence of the established church on society, he sought common ground with religious believers and valued diversity of thought.

Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), published just after his death, became famous for its account of his upbringing under James Mill, author of *The History of British India* (1817) and the central figure of the "philosophic radicals" influenced by Bentham (Mill, *Autobiography*, 203, 209, 594). Sitting next to his father at a desk, the young Mill's childhood became a severe educational experiment in the limits of rational training. By his mid-teens he had carefully studied much of what there was to learn from books at the time across all fields of learning. He started Greek at age 3, Latin at 8, and a year in France at the age of fourteen gave him a lifelong fluency in French language, culture, and politics. Among James Mill's friends who helped to instruct the young Mill were the political economist David Ricardo (1772-1823), the radical reformer Francis Place (1771-1854), the legal

theorist John Austin (1790-1859), and Bentham. In an early draft of his *Autobiography*, he wrote that his “was not an education of love but of fear” (Mill, *Autobiography*, 52), but he also expressed appreciation for his upbringing and remained an admirer of his father’s intellectual contributions and reform efforts (Mill, James Mill’s *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 99-101).

Mill’s closest collaborator on social, political, and economic subjects was Harriet Taylor, who was also the love of his life. In a careful arrangement, they met regularly and discretely for nearly two decades until her husband’s death in 1849. Their partnership during this time strained relationships with Mill’s friends and family who expressed disapproval. In 1851, Mill and Taylor finally were married, until Taylor herself died in 1858. During their twenty-eight years together, they worked closely on many philosophical projects. Mill held her in the highest regard personally and intellectually, and he saw her as the more creative thinker between them. She was the author of “The Enfranchisement of Women” (1851), an important early feminist essay. In the 1840s, they together wrote a series of newspaper articles on the need for domestic violence laws. And there is good reason to regard her as the co-author of both *On Liberty* and at least one key chapter of *Principles of Political Economy* (McCabe 2023; Schmidt-Petri, Schefczyk, and Osburg, 2022). Mill himself emphasized her significant role in those works.

Unlike most philosophers, Mill’s work cannot be fully understood without attending to his determined public advocacy of social and political reforms. In his lifetime, Mill was both admired and attacked for his strident campaigns on behalf of radical causes, most of them grounded in a commitment to social, political, and economic equality:

The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions, by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of an universally stigmatized injustice and tyranny. So it has been with the distinctions of slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of colour, race, and sex. (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 259).

Mill campaigned for democratic electoral reforms, women’s equality, domestic violence laws, workers’ rights, economic redistribution, property reform, birth control, the rejection of inherent racial superiority, and the defeat of the South in the American Civil War. When he died, *The Standard* expressed the common view that, “For good or evil, for truth or error, no man’s writing in this age has produced a wider effect” (The Standard 1873, 5). Yet Mill often faced resistance and ridicule for these efforts. *The Standard* called Mill’s support for women’s equality a “craze” and lamented his “furious speeches and writings against the Confederates,” saying that Mill “could storm and rave on some of his favorite crotchets like an angry woman” (The Standard 1873, 5). During his controversial term in Parliament, the conservative press often depicted him wearing a dress due to his support for women’s rights (Hookway 2012, 90-93). He also expended a great deal of political capital on his unpopular campaign to punish Governor Eyre of Jamaica for rights violations during the Morant Bay Rebellion. After he lost his bid for reelection, *The Times* of London labeled him an “extreme” man (Kinzer, Robson, and Robson 1992, 269). It is striking, then, that many of the reforms he fought for have become widely accepted in modern liberal democracies, though perhaps not in the fullness he desired (Stafford 1998, 104-140; Reeves 2007, 481-487).

3. PHILOSOPHY

1. *A System of Logic*. – 2. The Greatest Happiness Principle. – 3. Progress, Liberty, and Democracy. – 4. Equality. – 5. India and Empire. – 6. Distribution, Socialism, and Sustainability.

1. A System of Logic

Mill's philosophical reputation was established with the publication of *A System of Logic* (1843). From his twenties, he had hoped to contribute to “the science of science itself, the science of investigation—of method” (Mill, Letter to John Sterling, 79). He set out an experimental method based in sense experience and inductive inference to provide a systematic alternative to the “German, *a priori*, view of human knowledge” dominant at the time: “[T]he *System of Logic* supplies what was much wanted, a text-book of the opposite doctrine—that which derives all knowledge from experience” (Mill, *Autobiography*, 233; Macleod 2020). The intuitionist school was not just wrong but dangerous: “The notion that truths external to the mind may be known by intuition or consciousness, independently of observation and experience, is, I am persuaded, in these times, the great intellectual support of false doctrines and bad institutions . . . There never was such an instrument devised for consecrating all deep seated prejudices” (Mill, *Autobiography*, 233; Mill, *The Church*, 424-426; Mill, Letter to Walter Coulson, 53).

A System of Logic thus attempted to lay the groundwork for a public, a posteriori approach to the justification and testing of inferential claims. This practical logic concerned the vast web of inferential knowledge beyond the limited “truths known to us by immediate consciousness” such as “our own bodily sensations and mental feelings” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 6-7, 9). For Mill, science was a complex structure of provisional, but self-correcting, inductive inferences based ultimately in these immediate sensations of individuals. He emphasized that much of what we imagine ourselves to perceive directly or “apprehend intuitively” is in fact “very rapid inference” on the basis of instantaneous associations (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 7, 641-2; Macleod 2024). One principal claim was that inference strictly runs from “particulars to particulars,” and is therefore inductive, because evidence for any conclusion deduced from a generalization just is the evidence on which the generalization was based in the first place (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 193). To ensure the rigor of scientific claims, Mill introduced a well-known set of principles for isolating causes and effects, sometimes called “Mill's methods”: the method of agreement, the method of difference, the joint method of agreement and difference, the method of residues, and the method of concomitant variations, as well as their associated practical “canons” for inquiry (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 388-406). Deductive inferences play an important but secondary role, allowing us to interpret and test a generalization. But they adduce no new evidence because the conclusion of any syllogism is already contained in its major premise (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 183, 196).

Mill treated even the axioms of geometry and other areas of mathematics as experimental truths rather than necessary truths known a priori: “The proposition, Two straight lines cannot inclose a

space... is an induction from the evidence of our senses” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 231). In asserting this, he did not mean to throw mathematical truths into doubt. He believed such claims receive “confirmation in almost every instant of our lives . . . Experimental proof crowds in upon us in such endless profusion, and without one instance in which there can be even a suspicion of an exception to the rule” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 231-232). But necessity, he wrote, “means no more than certainty” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 252).

Mill also thought that the law of causation itself—the law of the uniform succession of events that lies beneath other inductive inferences—could be regarded with similar certainty. The claim “that all the successions of events [are] uniform and according to fixed laws” is “satisfactorily proved” by enumerative induction: “[W]e not only do not know of any exception, but the exceptions which limit or apparently invalidate the special laws, are so far from contradicting the universal one, that they confirm it” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 571). Mill argued that a cause was invariably or regularly followed by another type of event, i.e. the effect. No necessary connection was required for causation.

In the theory of names, Mill introduced a distinction between connotation and denotation that continues to inform philosophical discussion (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 30-40). On his view, the term “human” *denotes* each of the things to which it applies, including “Peter, Jane, John, and an indefinite number of other individuals,” but it also *connotes* the attributes in virtue of which things are grouped under that term, such as “corporeity, animal life, rationality, and a certain external form” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 31). Some terms, however, like proper names, do not work this way. The name “Paul,” for instance, denotes an individual but has no connotation; proper names are just markers (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 33-36). This difference between connotation and denotation becomes important because Mill wanted to distinguish merely “verbal propositions” from “real propositions” that concern matters of fact. Verbal propositions only spell out something about the connotation of a term, giving no information about reality (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 115-116). They are strictly about “usage or convention,” and “do not relate to any matter of fact, in the proper sense of the term, at all, but to the meaning of names” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 109). “Man is a rational being,” for instance, just spells out part of the connotation of “man.” *A System of Logic* focused readers’ attention on real propositions and “real inferences” in which the conclusion “embraces more than is contained in the premises” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 163; Mill, *Use and Abuse of Political Terms*, 6-8).

In the final book of the *Logic*, Mill addressed a range of issues concerning the moral and social sciences. He articulated a version of compatibilism about free will, a new science of human character development called “ethology,” and a “science of society” aimed at ascertaining the causes of social development generally (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 911). In the social sciences, he believed that there could be little certainty because the subject matter is so “changeable.” Human beings, having been formed by their circumstances, “in their turn, mould and shape the circumstances for themselves and for those who come after them” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 913). Social development, he understood, is a complex phenomenon.

Revised over the course of eight editions, the final version of *A System of Logic* was published in 1872. Mill took up many related issues in *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*

(1865), including metaphysical questions like the nature of reality and the self that he had set aside in the *Logic*.

2. *The greatest happiness principle*

Mill's *Autobiography* recounts the moment as a teenager that Bentham's utilitarianism became the foundation for his intellectual development (Mill, *Autobiography*, 69). By his early twenties, he had completed editing Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* (1827) and had taken up the cause of utilitarianism and philosophical radicalism in debating societies, newspapers, and reviews. Although he later criticized Benthamite utilitarianism as woefully incomplete and supplemented it with insights from a variety of other thinkers, he always remained committed to the basic utilitarian framework adopted in his youth.

The core idea of utilitarianism is the "greatest happiness principle," which says: (1) that what matters fundamentally is individuals' well-being, (2) that well-being should be understood fundamentally in terms of happiness and the avoidance of suffering, (3) that dispositions, character, actions, rules, policies, laws, and institutions all should be evaluated fundamentally just by their contribution to individuals' happiness, and (4) that, each individual's happiness fundamentally counts equally or impartially. Putting these together, the deceptively simple animating idea of utilitarian ethics is to maximize everyone's happiness impartially. Mill himself understood this commitment to imply a presumption in favor of "equality of treatment" for everyone (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 258).

Important complications for utilitarianism arise in the form of epistemic, psychological, physical, and social constraints on individuals' decisions and actions, including difficulties in determining tradeoffs and demands on people's time, as well as differences in what brings individuals happiness. These challenges underscore the importance of heuristics, general practical rules, and institutional structures to guide agents in different states of society. Mill's utilitarianism thus placed great emphasis on education and character development as well as on how to organize and limit decision-making authority in society. Moreover, different social norms and political institutions are appropriate in different historical or cultural circumstances. He believed that social morality ultimately should be grounded in norms of equality, reciprocity, solidarity, and individuality, but he also understood that society must permanently safeguard the free discussion and social experimentation that allow for individual growth and collective learning from experience (Mill, *On Liberty*, 260-261, 272). Much of the complexity of Mill's utilitarian theory appears in his handling of these various practical considerations.

A further complication in both Bentham and Mill was their inclusion of at least some non-human "sentient beings" within the purview of the principle. As Mill put it: "[T]he general principle to which all rules of practice ought to conform, and the test by which they should be tried, is that of conduciveness to the happiness of mankind, or rather, of all sentient beings" (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 951; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 214). When the philosopher William Whewell (1794-1866) complained that most people would not find the inclusion of non-human animals "tolerable," Mill observed that in the American South it was then not tolerable to "sacrifice any portion of the happiness of white men for the sake of a greater amount of happiness to black men" (Mill, Whewell

on Moral Philosophy, 186-187). Rather than rely on people's mere preferences or intuitions like these, utilitarians were willing to "stake the whole question" of morality on the status of non-human animals (Mill, Whewell on Moral Philosophy, 186-187).

This exchange with Whewell demonstrates the main methodological debate in moral philosophy as Bentham and Mill understood it. In trying to establish the greatest happiness principle as the rational moral standard on a posteriori grounds, they hoped to undermine a priori appeals to moral intuition, common sense, or natural rights that insulated prevailing social or political practices from criticism (Mill, *Nature*, 373-402). On their view, such appeals often amounted to merely dressing up the sentiments or preferences of the powerful, such as the aristocracy or the church, or of those in thrall to the familiar. Reference to an external standard like happiness "is essential to the very idea of moral philosophy; is, in fact, what renders argument or discussion on moral questions possible" (Mill, Bentham, 111). Moreover, the status quo bias of a morality based on intuition or common sense amounted to the absurd claim that there was nothing more to learn about morality through experience (Mill, Whewell on Moral Philosophy, 179). By contrast, the greatest happiness principle, properly understood, called not only for specific social and political reforms, but for ongoing free discussion and social experimentation.

Despite early recognition and success, in 1826 Mill suffered a "mental crisis." He realized that even if he achieved all his proposed reforms, he would not be happy himself (Mill, *Autobiography*, 139). He therefore came to appreciate, both for himself and for utilitarian theory, that the cultivation of emotional capacities and the well-rounded development of character is vital to promoting human happiness (Donner 1991; Heydt 2006). This turning point significantly expanded the sense of the utilitarian project. Bentham and James Mill had attended too exclusively to the outward or material conditions affecting utility (such as security, subsistence, and incentive structures). Mill now argued that people's character can be cultivated in meaningful ways that greatly affect their own and others' happiness (Mill, Bentham, 111-112; Mill, *A System of Logic*, 861-874; Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 261).

Mill had been trained to be a rational thinking machine. But he emerged from his "crisis" with a new appreciation of the emotions and the educative role of the arts that lasted a lifetime. Romantic poetry played an especially important part in Mill's growth. He also enjoyed improvising on the piano, and he developed a great aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment, in part from long walking tours with friends that supplied his expansive botanical collection. After his death, his friends and stepson would attest to his personal warmth, humor, and generosity (Bain 1882, 148-155; Taylor 1892; Stafford 1998, 54).

James Mill died in 1836, Bentham having died four years earlier. With their departure, Mill would become the leading intellectual figure in the radical tradition in England. Because of his differences with Benthamite utilitarianism, from the late 1820s through the late 1840s he explored insights from a wide range of thinkers including the Saint-Simonians, Comte, Coleridge, Carlyle, Tocqueville, Guizot, Blanc, and many others. He valued Goethe's idea of "many-sidedness" and tried to weave their insights about life and society into a coherent utilitarian structure. With this aim in mind, he became the editor of the *London Review*, which merged into the *London and Westminster Review*, from 1835 until 1840. Conscious that he was writing in a transitional age of unsettled opinions, he emphasized intellectual openness. Three important essays from this period,

“Sedgwick’s Discourse” (1835), “Bentham” (1838), and “Coleridge” (1840), set out elements of the new utilitarian synthesis that would inform later works.

In *A System of Logic* (1843), Mill offered a practical framework expressing this expanded utilitarian project, called the “Art of Life.” The Art of Life, as he understood it, is constituted by three “departments”—“Morality, Prudence or Policy, and Aesthetics”—which correspond to the ideas of “the Right, the Expedient, and the Beautiful or Noble, in human conduct and works” (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 949-950). Each department is constituted by general practical rules that are ultimately to be regulated by the greatest happiness principle, but the three departments concern different aspects of ethical evaluation and decision-making. Roughly speaking, “Prudence or Policy,” which Mill also called “simple expediency,” concerns whether an agent’s decision actually leads to the best consequences, either for the individual (prudence) or for society (policy) (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 949, 951; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 246, 255). “Morality” concerns whether an agent’s decision is blameworthy or appropriately coerced, and therefore a failure of duty, given reasonable shared expectations in the existing state of society (Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 337-338; Mill, Letter to William George Ward [1], 25-26; Bain 1859, 319-323). As Mill put it, “Morality” tells us when someone is a “fit object of punishment” or blame, who “would not be entitled to complain” because they were rightfully held accountable (Mill, James Mill’s *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 242; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 246; Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, 461). “Aesthetics” concerns whether an agent’s decision reveals deficiencies in the character of the agent meriting contempt, aversion, and advice by others, or rather reveals an excellent character meriting admiration, praise, and emulation (Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 337-338; Mill, *A System of Logic*, 952). While agents should not be held accountable for failures beyond their moral duties, the department of “Aesthetics” makes room for non-coercive educational or exhortatory practices.

In utilitarian theory, individuals’ well-being is what matters fundamentally, and so it might seem that “Prudence or Policy” should have priority over “Morality” and “Aesthetics,” but each department of the Art of Life matters in an ethical system providing practical guidance. Neither “Morality” nor “Aesthetics” can be reduced directly to determinations of expediency in the moment. Given that determinations of expediency are often uncertain or controversial, it is vital that “Aesthetics” provides guidance on the development of character and that “Morality” provides a set of shared expectations to ground practices of accountability—what we owe to each other—and thereby secure social stability and coordination (Turner 2018). As a moral reformer, Mill took his role to be to advocate for changes in “Morality” given new understanding and new social possibilities: “[T]he domain of moral duty, in an improving society, is always widening. When what once was uncommon virtue becomes common virtue, it comes to be numbered among obligations, while a degree exceeding what has grown common, remains simply meritorious” (Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 338).

The three departments of the Art of Life allow for complex ethical evaluations of people’s behavior within a utilitarian framework. One can imagine an admirable person who is nevertheless blameworthy for failing to attend properly to an important piece of information, whether or not their decision is expedient (Mill, James Mill’s *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 253). One can imagine someone who lacks an admirable character or is blameworthy, but who unintentionally performs the expedient action. And our evaluations of some people in the distant

past—people who were not blameworthy in their time but held deeply incorrect views—depend on such distinctions. The idea that life requires these complex ethical determinations runs through Mill's work (Mill, Bentham, 112-113; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 255-259). Most striking is his admiration of Catholicism's acceptance of "two standards of morality," one a standard of perfection appropriate for sainthood, and the other a standard of obligation appropriate for salvation (Mill, Auguste Comte and Positivism, 337-339; Mill, Letter to George Grote, 763). All of this is consistent with a foundational commitment to the greatest happiness principle.

A System of Logic also contained Mill's most detailed treatment of the nature of practical rules of conduct, like those constituting the three departments. He argued that they are general, not absolute, rules providing provisional guidance to limited human agents (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 945-946, 877). General practical rules are based on empirical laws that are themselves only "approximate generalizations" (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 889, 907-908). They vary by time, place, culture, and other circumstances (Mill, Letter to John Austin, 712). Even rules of apparently "transcendent expediency," like the rule of telling the truth, always allow exceptions (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 223, 225; Mill and Grote, Taylor's Statesman, 638, 640). They also sometimes conflict with one another, or may face "some unusual circumstance," in which case a direct appeal to the greatest happiness principle might be required (Mill, *A System of Logic*, 944, 946; Mill, Thornton on Labour and Its Claims, 659; Letter to E.W. Young, 1327-1328).

Mill thus rejected the view that conformity with justified practical rules in and of itself constitutes the moral rightness or wrongness of an action. He explicitly criticized a version of such rule utilitarianism found in Berkeley (Mill, Berkeley's Life and Writings, 468-469). But none of this is to deny the vital importance of practical rules as guides for practical life. Besides capturing many of the shared expectations that inform accountability judgments within the department of "Morality," they embody the accumulated wisdom of humankind and, therefore, deserve deference in most cases when an individual might believe a rule-violation is justified (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 220; Mill, Letter to George Grote, 762; Mill, Sedgwick's Discourse, 59).

In 1852, Mill published "Whewell on Moral Philosophy," an important essay that continued the philosophical fight against intuitionist moral philosophy. "When real reasons are wanted," he wrote, "the repudiated happiness-principle is always the resource" (Mill, Whewell on Moral Philosophy, 192). By the mid-1850s, he also began work on his most enduring contribution to moral theory, *Utilitarianism* (1861). Mill repeatedly pointed others to this work.

Utilitarianism defended the greatest happiness principle against common objections, but also developed it in key respects. One new development was Mill's account of the sentiment and standard of justice in a utilitarian system. He distinguished the standard of justice from direct determinations of expediency in two steps. First, he argued that justice falls within the department of "Morality," concerning what a person "may rightfully be compelled to fulfil" (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 246). Second, he argued that, within "Morality," justice is the "most sacred and binding part," defining individual rights that protect the "essentials" of well-being, such as the right to basic security and the right to impartial consideration (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 255-257).

Mill also introduced a novel development to the hedonist theory of well-being, according to which happiness is entirely a function of the balance of pleasure and pain. He argued that hedonists should

attend not only to the *quantity* of pleasure at stake in a choice situation, but also to the *quality* of pleasure. To promote happiness, he suggested, one may choose *less* of a higher quality pleasure rather than *more* of a lower quality pleasure.

The discussion of quality of pleasures is contained in just a few pages of *Utilitarianism*. Resisting the charge that utilitarianism is “a doctrine worthy only of swine,” Mill argued that pleasures that exercise our higher-order cognitive and emotional faculties are much more valuable than others, even if they often involve greater frustration or discontent (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 210). His evidence for this claim is the fact that competent judges who have experienced these higher-order pleasures consistently prefer them and would not “resign [them] for any quantity of the other pleasure” (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 211). “Few human creatures,” he wrote, “would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of the beast’s pleasures” (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 211).

To understand Mill’s claim about the quality of pleasures, compare the pleasure that a typical pig experiences in eating a delicious meal with the pleasure that a typical human experiences in eating a delicious meal. Mill’s point is that a human would not “resign,” that is, give up entirely, the human experience of the delicious meal even for an endless supply of pig experiences. Doing so would mean giving up the capacities that make the human experience of a meal such a wonder: our appreciation of the delicacy and authenticity of the cooking, our awareness of the difficulty of acquiring certain ingredients, our respect for the chef’s training, our recognition that the dish differs slightly from last time, the way the meal reminds us of home or of a favorite vacation, our being stimulated to reflect on the culinary benefits of multiculturalism, and all sorts of other ideas and pleasurable associations. Any disappointment we might feel at a poorly cooked meal, or frustration with other aspects of the experience, is minor in comparison with the marvel of having such experiences at all. In a different work, Mill observed that due to our higher-order associations with certain attachments, such as our family or hometown, they “become pleasures of greater constancy and even intensity, and altogether more valuable to us, than any of the primitive pleasures of our constitution” (Mill, *James Mill’s Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 220-225). The qualitative aspect of Mill’s hedonism has vexed interpreters. But on this reading, “higher quality” just registers the fact that some pleasurable experiences, understood to include all of their associations, contain such an enormous quantity of pleasure in virtue of having engaged our capacities more fully, that we would not give up those experiences entirely for any quantity of pleasurable experiences that did *not* similarly engage those capacities, even if we might trade off some of them (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 212; Mill, *Diary*, 663; Schmidt-Petri 2006, 174-175).

Finally, *Utilitarianism* also provided what Mill called a “proof” of the claim that only individuals’ happiness is desirable in itself, and that the happiness of all is therefore the appropriate end of human conduct. By “proof” he did not mean deductive proof, but proof in the broader sense of that term associated with the idea of a test. To that end, he argued, first, that individuals overwhelmingly desire their own happiness, and that this is strong evidence that their own happiness is desirable or part of their well-being or good. Second, the evidence also suggests that people desire all other goods either as a means to, or as part of, their happiness. People may associate a certain cause of happiness, like virtue, so closely with happiness itself that they come to value it for its own sake. However, he argues, if virtue ceased to contribute consistently to happiness, eventually people would no longer value it this way. Together these claims suggest that,

for each of us, our own happiness is the only good ultimately desirable in itself, and therefore, that happiness is what each of our well-being ultimately consists in. Mill's third claim, then, is that if the evidence suggests that your happiness is ultimately what your good consists in, and the evidence suggests that my happiness is ultimately what my good consists in, and so on for every individual, then we have all the evidence needed to conclude that "the sum of all these goods must be a good" (Mill, Letter to Henry Jones, 1414; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 234-237). If we recall Mill's commitment to impartiality as a basic part of utilitarian ethics, we have arrived at the principle of maximizing everyone's happiness impartially (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 257).

Mill grappled carefully with the difficulties of applying the greatest happiness principle to epistemically and emotionally limited agents in a world defined by various social and physical constraints. Despite the greatest happiness principle's initial simplicity, it often leads to complicated prescriptions for individual agents and whole societies. Due in large part to Mill's sensitive development of it, utilitarianism remains one of the leading moral traditions in western philosophy.

3. *Progress, Liberty, and Democracy*

In the mid-1850s, Mill and Taylor collaborated closely on one of the foundational texts of the liberal tradition, *On Liberty* (1859). Mill wrote that it concerned "the importance, to man and society, of a large variety in types of character, and of giving full freedom to human nature to expand itself in innumerable and conflicting directions" (Mill, *Autobiography*, 259). He had previously observed that free discussion and social diversity generated the "simulating collision" of ideas necessary for social progress (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 979; Mill, *The Church*, 424-427; Mill, *Perfectibility*, 428-431; Mill, *A System of Logic*, 927). But *On Liberty* significantly expanded on these ideas while providing classic statements of both the principled limits on social and political authority's right to interfere with individual liberty and the value of "individuality" as an element of well-being.

The book has inspired a wide range of thinkers, including many who have divorced its main arguments from Mill's utilitarian framework. For Mill and Taylor, *On Liberty* concerned "utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 224). This permanent interest, they argued, is in maintaining the freedoms necessary for independent personal growth and social learning: "[T]he only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals" (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 272, 310). An advanced utilitarian society must remain an open society.

In an influential chapter on freedom of discussion, Mill and Taylor defended an absolute commitment not to restrict viewpoints in sincere and fair-minded public discussion. It is not that all expression of opinion must always be protected, such as expression that partakes in criminal or seriously harmful action, but proper "discussion" should never be censored. The harm of silencing discussion, they argued, always outweighs the harm of allowing it. In this they developed long-held commitments of the philosophic radicals from Mill's youth (Mill, *Law of Libel and Liberty of the Press*, 3-34; Mill, *Mr. O'Connell's Bill for the Liberty of the Press*, 165-168). They also

built on Bentham's claim that any indefinite silencing of discussion would amount to an "assumption of infallibility" by the censor, as if the censor were in an epistemic position to dictate terms to all of posterity (Turner 2013, 98-99). Recalling criticisms of intuitionism, they also argued that "discussion and experience" is necessary to keep public decision-making from becoming dominated by the mere "likings and dislikings" of the powerful (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 231, 222). Importantly, they concluded that the same considerations that justify freedom of discussion also justify social experimentation, or "experiments of living" (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 260; Anderson 1991).

Several sections of *On Liberty* are taken up with articulating and defending what is now called the "harm principle" or "liberty principle," which holds that society may legitimately consider interfering with individual liberty only when there is risk of nonconsensual harm to others (Turner 2014; Saunders 2016). In *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill had defended a general but defeasible "non-interference" principle that placed the burden of justification on authorities proposing to interfere coercively with individuals (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 936, 938). The harm principle in *On Liberty* took on a more absolute character. Its core upshot was a strong anti-paternalism: society may not interfere coercively with an adult individual for the individual's own good, or with consenting adults for their own good. "Over himself," Mill and Taylor wrote, "over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign" (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 224). This principle placed an important constraint on social and political authorities tempted to coercively regulate actions they deemed inherently wrong in the absence of nonconsensual harm to others. It challenged paternalistic church interference aimed at saving an individual's soul in the afterlife as well as men's paternalistic control over women. In purely personal matters, they argued, "the most ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge immeasurably surpassing those that can be possessed by any one else," and so society may not rightfully interfere on that basis (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 277).

Mill and Taylor also articulated the importance of being one's own person through a process of self-development, an aspect of character they called "individuality." The person who exhibits individuality "employs all his faculties" of observation, reasoning, judgment, and self-control (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 262–263; Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 940). Individuality should not be confused with self-interest: "self-regarding virtues... are only second in importance, if even second, to the social" (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 277). Moreover, not everyone has the opportunities or resources to exhibit individuality fully. But individuality provided a moral core to *On Liberty*, reflecting Mill and Taylor's emphasis on character development, that complemented the call for free discussion and social experimentation: "Where, not the person's own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness" (Mill [and Taylor], *On Liberty*, 261).

In Mill's related work on democratic institutional design, notably in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), social progress through individual development remained the guiding principle. For Mill, the primary *educative* aim of government meant facilitating a virtuous cycle in which ever-improving individuals—with greater expertise, public-spiritedness, and self-motivation—become capable of inhabiting ever-improving institutions: "[T]he most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and

intelligence of the people themselves” (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 390, 392).

Mill’s institutional designs were also marked by a second aim, that of organizing people’s existing good qualities to secure competent decision-making (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 389, 392). This *organizational* aim contributed to his defense of a range of proposals, from proportional representation to divided government (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 59-64). He even floated the idea of plural votes for those more competent in public affairs (Mill, *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform*, 323; Miller 2015). But Mill believed that specific proposals aiming to enhance competent decision-making must remain within the basic liberal democratic framework itself justified on educative and organizational grounds: only liberal conditions allow the experimentation needed for learning and growth, while only democracy trains citizens for public life and provides security for good government (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 406, 412, 441, 469; Mill, Appendix B, 648-653). His commitment to democracy placed two basic constraints on specific designs. First, no “minority should be allowed to outweigh the majority,” which can result from iterated majoritarian procedures (Mill, *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform*, 329). Second, “minorities should be adequately represented,” such that proportional representation became for him the “first principle of democracy” (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 452).

The combination of educative commitments and organizational designs provides a systematic structure for much of Mill’s practical ethics and political philosophy. For instance, while the overarching point of *On Liberty* is the progressive value of liberty, its anti-paternalism principle is also an organizational proposal based on the observation that individuals generally are the best judges of their own good. Similarly, while Mill’s ethics emphasizes the importance of character development for moral progress, he also repeatedly faces the practical question of who should decide what to do when the greatest happiness is uncertain, for instance when an agent must decide whether to defer to a general rule in a hard case (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 220; Mill, Letter to George Grote, 762; Mill, Sedgwick’s Discourse, 59). Much of Mill’s utilitarian discussion of practical rules and social morality therefore has a *jurisdictional* character, focused on the need for good organization to bring competence to bear under uncertainty.

4. Equality

Mill believed that moral or social improvement must tend in the direction of social and political equality, sometimes called “relational” equality (Turner 2019). In the 1840s, he wrote in a letter: “In my estimation the art of living with others consists first & chiefly in treating & being treated by them as equals” (Mill, Letter to Arthur Helps, 2001). In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), he argued that “The true virtue of human beings is fitness to live together as equals, claiming nothing for themselves but what they as freely concede to everyone else” (Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 294). He also supported the redistribution of wealth through government provision, property reform, and high inheritance taxes. But as an egalitarian, he primarily looked forward to the day when hierarchies of all sorts no longer existed, not only class-based distinctions but any “aristocracies of colour, race, and sex” (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 259; Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 269, 294, 299, 340; Mill, *Vindication of the French Revolution of February 1848*, 354).

Utilitarianism requires the impartial or equal consideration of individuals' happiness. In practice, Mill believed this required equal social and political status, including a presumption of equality of treatment (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 257-258; Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 262). Much of Mill's public advocacy was therefore taken up with trying to advance this vision of a "society in equality" through the provision of equal rights and economic redistribution, including measures like subsistence aid and inheritance taxes (Turner 2019). In the ideal, he imagined a society marked by real reciprocity and solidarity, in which we not only abide by fair rules but also come to identify our own well-being with that of others (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 233; Mill, Letter to William George Ward [2], 650; Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 294, 328-329; Mill, Letter to Frederick J. Furnivall [2], 53).

In his lifetime, Mill became most famous as a campaigner for women's equality. Mill and Taylor's writings on women, marriage, domestic violence, obligations to children, and reproductive rights, place them among the first philosophers in the liberal tradition to give sustained attention to justice within the family. For Mill, this commitment was partly an inheritance from Bentham, although his own father rejected it in his *Essay on Government* in 1820. William Thompson, another follower of Bentham, had coauthored with Anna Doyle Wheeler a book-length broadside on behalf of women's rights (Thompson and Wheeler 1825). Like Thompson and Wheeler, Mill and Taylor regarded the situation of women as a form of slavery, a conviction they carried forward in their private correspondence and public advocacy (Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 264-271; Mill, Cooperation: Closing Speech, 314, 321). Law and custom had subordinated women from birth, giving them no chance to overcome their social "disability" through demonstrations of merit (Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 275, 299, 325; Mill, The Californian Constitution, 1149-1150). Mill highlighted the way social practices and institutions could distort women's and men's conceptions of themselves, shaping what they felt they *should* be and thereby limiting what they *could* be (Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 272, 288; Mill, Cooperation: Closing Speech, 314; Nussbaum 2010, 130). He argued that women should be allowed to show their relative strengths and weakness under conditions of equal freedom and that, despite their situation, many had in fact demonstrated their capacities, and possibilities for all women. Men, by contrast, had repeatedly demonstrated their own undeserved advantage. To establish a true society in equality, Mill's prescription was an enforced rule of law that did not rely on the individual good intentions of men to secure the well-being of women: "We have had the morality of submission, and the morality of chivalry and generosity; the time is now come for the morality of justice" (Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 294, 328-329).

Mill campaigned constantly for women's equality and is widely remembered for his attempt to introduce an amendment in Parliament to give women the vote. Millicent Fawcett, the English suffragist, recalled that he was "the one member of Parliament whose high intellectual position enabled him to raise the question without being laughed down as a fool" (Fawcett 1873, 60). In the "improvement of the position of women," she wrote, "Mr. Mill's influence can scarcely be over-estimated" (Fawcett 1873, 61).

In 1850, Mill took a stand on another challenge to relational equality, the rise of scientific racism. Thomas Carlyle had published a viciously racist essay in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1849, and Mill felt compelled to reply. His essay, "The Negro Question" (1850), took Carlyle to task: "a doctrine

more damnable, I should think, never was propounded by a professed moral reformer . . . [than] that one kind of human beings are born servants to another kind” (Mill, *The Negro Question*, 92). Mill pointed out that “the earliest known civilization was . . . a negro civilization” in Egypt and warned against “the vulgar error of imputing every difference which [one] finds among human beings to an original difference in nature” (Mill, *The Negro Question*, 93).

Mill’s own essays are filled with objectionable generalizations about “race.” But in almost every example, he is referring to peoples defined by what he perceived to be their dominant cultural norms and circumstances (Varouxakis 2002, 39). In this way, Mill employed broad stereotypes about national character, including that the English were selfish and small-minded, and he failed to respect fully the diversity of cultural practices developed in different places and times. But he pushed back against attributing variation among groups or peoples to underlying natural or biological differences rather than to contingent historical, socio-political, or geographical factors (Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 277; Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 319; Mill, *De Tocqueville on Democracy in America* [II], 197; Mill, *Letter to John Boyd Kinnear*, 1093).

Besides his leadership of the committee that attempted to hold Governor Eyre accountable for violating the rights of Black Jamaicans, the 1860s also saw Mill campaign for Black emancipation in the American Civil War. English sentiments were divided about the war. In public essays like “The Contest in America” (1862) and “The Slave Power” (1862), and in private letters, Mill argued that the central issue of the war must be the eradication of slavery, which was an abomination. Previously, he had written that nothing was “more detestable” in human history than the slave trade (Mill, *The Negro Question*, 88). Now he argued that “The South are in rebellion . . . for the right of burning human creatures alive” (Mill, *The Contest in America*, 136). His intervention helped to sustain English workingmen’s support for the Union blockade on Confederate cotton, at great cost to themselves (Palen 2013).

As the war ended, Mill wrote to American correspondents about the need “to break altogether the power of the slaveholding caste” to block the return of slavery by another name: “If an aristocracy of ex-slaveholders remain masters of the State legislatures they will be able effectually to nullify a great part of the result which has been so dearly bought by the blood of the Free States” (Mill, *Letter to Parke Godwin*, 1052; Mill, *Letter to William Martin Dickson*, 1098-1101). He argued that “complete emancipation” for Black Americans required providing them significant resources in the form of land ownership and education (Mill, *Letter to John Appleton*, 886). With measures like these, “the cause of freedom is safe & the opening words of the Declaration of Independence will cease to be a reproach to the nation founded by its authors” (Mill, *Letter to Parke Godwin*, 1052).

Mill was regularly targeted by political and intellectual opponents for these efforts (*The Standard* 1873, 5; Kinzer, Robson, and Robson 1992, 224-229; Varouxakis 1998, 27). Even his close friend Alexander Bain would write that one of Mill’s “greatest theoretical errors as a scientific thinker” was “his doctrine of the natural equality of men” (Bain 1882, 146). But Mill’s liberal utilitarianism remained committed to moral, social, and political equality (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 259, 258; Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 481).

5. *India and Empire*

In 1823, Mill took a junior civil service position in the East India Company, under his father. He would stay there for thirty-five years, preparing dispatches about policy matters from the directors in the London office to the administration in India. In 1833, the Company ceased to be a commercial enterprise itself but continued to administer India as a dependency for Britain. Mill ultimately succeeded to the position of chief of the Examiner's Office in 1856, but he quit just two years later when the British Crown directly assumed the governing functions previously delegated to the East India Company. He argued that the shift would be disastrous for India because the British government had less understanding of Indian affairs and less ability to insulate India from public opinion and other political pressures in London (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 573; Mill, *The Petition of the East-India Company*, 81-83).

In his *Autobiography*, Mill says little about his time at the East India Company, except that the position provided him financial security, practical policy experience, and plenty of time to work on his philosophical projects (Mill, *Autobiography*, 83, 85, 87). This suggests that India was not at the center of his thought outside of work hours. But he addressed issues related to empire and India in a handful of essays, and in testimony to Parliament (Mill, *The East India Company's Charter*, 33-74; Moir 1990, vii-liv).

As a general matter, writing at the dawn of liberal democracy, Mill believed that more “civilized” countries could help “backward” peoples to develop large-scale, self-sustaining cooperative society (what Mill meant by “civilization”) through paternalistic colonial rule (Mill, *Civilization*, 120, 122; Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 567-568). All societies, he argued, had been “backward” at one time or another, and they needed to progress through stages of development from a Hobbesian state of nature to liberal democracy (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 394-397, 419). But different societies were at different points along that path. He believed that India, unlike England, lacked a critical mass of individuals ready for spontaneous cooperation and democratic government.

Mill's writings on social development are littered with painful references to “savages” and “barbarians,” but he pushed back against claims that differences among peoples were based on inherent or biological factors (Varouxakis 2002, 38-52; Muthu 2003, 279). He also acknowledged serious failings of “civilized” countries—Mill was often a harsh critic of the English—and the dangers they posed for native populations. He further argued that foreign intervention could be justified only in certain circumstances (Mill, *A Few Words on Non-Intervention*, 118-120; Varouxakis 2013, 77-86; Beaumont and Li 2022). But, as he saw it, after millennia in which strife, oppression, disease, and the struggle for subsistence had defined human existence, some countries had fortuitously discovered basic economic, legal, and educational building-blocks that other societies could be taught as a shortcut to a flourishing liberal democracy. In certain circumstances, then, paternalistic control could be justified for the sake of eventual democratic self-determination (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 565-577).

Mill's paternalistic justification of foreign control is now widely rejected for principled and practical reasons. He also failed to appreciate Indians' existing capacity for self-government and the full extent of their subordination and exploitation under the East India Company (Tharoor

2017). Although he never visited India, he was aware of discriminatory attitudes toward, and mistreatment of, Indians by Englishmen on the ground. He also acknowledged pressures from self-serving economic interests in England, and he was critical of some decisions by the Company. Nevertheless, he believed that the Company had provided competent general administration of its territory during his time there, and he did not see a better alternative government for India until Indians would collectively be ready (in his view) to take over (Mill, *The East India Company's Charter*, 65; Chiu and Taylor 2011, 1246-1249).

Despite his failures on India, Mill should not be identified with the worst impulses associated with modern colonialism (Varouxakis 2013, 101-144). On his view, English rule could not be justified by inherent racial superiority (which he rejected), by religious fervor (he was a religious skeptic and respected local religious customs), or by the economic interests of the colonial power itself (he tended toward moral cosmopolitanism). Colonial rule could be justified only on a temporary basis and with the aim of bringing the people themselves to the point of self-rule more quickly. Moreover, within the Company, Mill generally pushed for policies that respected Indian cultural practices, for instance concerning religion and the language of instruction in schools, and he advocated for Indians to take up more positions of responsibility in the government. He also supported land tenure reform to benefit Indian cultivators of the land (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 318-323; Mill, Letter to Henry Maine, 1536).

After he stepped down, Mill also expressed greater doubts about English rule abroad. He had been stunned “by the atrocities perpetrated” by the British in their response to the Indian rebellion of 1857, and by “the feelings which supported them at home,” especially among the educated classes (Mill, Letter to David Urquhart, 1206; Mill, Letter to William W. Ireland, 1282). He rose in Parliament to speak against the “inhuman and indiscriminate massacre, the seizing of persons in all parts of the country and putting them to death without trial, and then boasting of it” after the Indian uprising (Mill, *Petition Concerning the Fenians*, 189). Mill saw his public campaign against Governor Eyre of Jamaica while in Parliament both as a matter of justice for Black Jamaicans whose rights were violated and as a matter of asserting the importance of the rule of law in England’s dependencies and colonies generally (Holt 1992, 305-307). In the end, the “Eyre Affair” played a major role in Mill’s failure to win reelection in 1868. Thomas Carlyle, Eyre’s main public defender, would call Mill and his committee “nothing but a group or knot of rabid N****r-Philanthropists, barking furiously in the gutter” (Carlyle 1867, 14).

Elsewhere, Mill expressed grave concerns about the mistreatment of the Māori community by English settlers in New Zealand: “Here, then, is the burthen on the conscience of legislators at home. Can they give up the Maoris to the mercy of the more powerful, & constantly increasing, section of the population? Knowing what the English are, when they are left alone with what they think an inferior race, I cannot reconcile myself to this” (Mill, Letter to Henry Samuel Chapman, 1136; Mill, Letter to Robert Pharazyn, 1196). From the 1840s to the 1860s, Mill also repeatedly called for systematic changes to England’s treatment of the Irish, especially through land reform (Mill, *England and Ireland*, 507-532). In Ireland, unlike India, Mill clearly saw that British misrule was to blame. But these examples do not excuse Mill’s defense of colonial rule in India, which blights an otherwise forward-thinking record.

6. Distribution, Socialism, and Sustainability

With the publication of *Principles of Political Economy* in 1848, Mill became perhaps the leading heir to Adam Smith (1723-1790) and Ricardo in that emerging field. Like *A System of Logic*, *Principles* was adopted in the universities and widely read for decades, through many revisions. It updated principal findings of earlier political economists, applied them in new ways, and made several distinctive interventions concerning distribution, property, socialism, and the possibility of a “stationary state” with no economic growth. Mill commended the way competition, trade, and markets had overcome limitations of the feudal system. But he also followed Smith in emphasizing that political economy “is inseparably intertwined with many other branches of philosophy” (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, xci-xcii). This meant, among other things, that the new economy should serve society and not the other way around.

Mill strictly separated questions about the scientific laws of production from questions about the distribution of wealth. The laws of production were empirical laws like those in other sciences. But distribution he saw as a choice: “The things once there, mankind, individually or collectively, can do with them as they like” (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 199). To that end, Mill favored much greater “equality of fortunes,” primarily through subsistence aid and high inheritance taxes: “[T]he more wholesome state of society is not that in which immense fortunes are possessed by a few and coveted by all, but that in which the greatest possible numbers possess and are contented with a moderate competency, which all may hope to acquire” (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 891, 755; 224-226; 811; Mill, *Primogeniture*, 337-338; Mill, *The Income and Property Tax*, 491). His friend Bain recalled that when the *Principles* were published, Mill “frequently spoke of his proposals as to Inheritance and Bequest, which, if carried out, would pull down all large fortunes in two generations” (Bain 1882, 89).

As a utilitarian, he argued that property rights should not be absolute, but rather conditional on the general happiness. Property rights meant to reward effort had tended instead to reward birth or other privilege, and had left too many in poverty: “The very idea of distributive justice, or of any proportionality between success and merit, or between success and exertion, is in the present state of society so manifestly chimerical to be relegated to the regions of romance” (Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 714, 715; Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 207, 218-234; Mill, *Newman’s Political Economy*, 444). Mill thus focused redistributive tax policies on unearned income such as inheritance and the wealth accrued by landowners due to advances in the surrounding society, sometimes called the “unearned increment”: “They grow richer, as it were in their sleep, without working, risking, or economizing. What claim have they, on the general principle of social justice, to this accession of riches?” (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 819-820).

Emboldened by the revolutions of 1848, Mill and Taylor made additions to the 1852 edition of *Principles* expressing an increasingly favorable attitude toward socialism, a shift also announced in “Newman’s Political Economy” in 1851 (Mill, *Letter to Adolf Soetbeer*, 85; Mill, *Autobiography*, 255). On the critical side, they wholeheartedly endorsed the socialist critique of existing *laissez-faire* economic arrangements, which “could not be put into the rudest imaginings of a perfectly just state of society” (Mill, *Newman’s Political Economy*, 444). Mill observed that wage labor led to what others would call “surplus value” taken by the capitalists (Mill, *Principles*

of *Political Economy*, 410-411, 209, 383; Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 710; Persky 2016, 160-162). And he likened wage labor to a form of slavery:

No longer enslaved or made dependent by force of law, the great majority are so by force of poverty; they are still chained to a place, to an occupation, and to conformity with the will of an employer, and debarred by the accident of birth both from the enjoyments, and from the mental and moral advantages, which others inherit without exertion and independently of desert. That this is an evil equal to almost any of those against which mankind have hitherto struggled, the poor are not wrong in believing. Is it a necessary evil? They are told so by those who do not feel it—by those who have gained the prizes in the lottery of life. But it was also said that slavery, that despotism, that all the privileges of oligarchy were necessary. (Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 710; Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 383)

At best, then, *laissez-faire* could be regarded only as a transitional economic phase on the path from feudalism to something better (McCabe 2021, 43-92; Persky 2016, 74, 148).

On the positive side, Mill and Taylor acknowledged that the best form of socialism to remedy these problems remained an open question and that an evolving society would require “progressive experiments” (Mill, Newman’s *Political Economy*, 444). But they expressed hope for a “qualified” socialism (Mill, *Autobiography*, 199, 239) built on democratic worker cooperatives rather than central planning, about which they remained skeptical: “[W]e may, through the co-operative principle, see our way to a change in society, which would combine the freedom and independence of the individual, with the moral, intellectual, and economical advantages of aggregate production” (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 793; Baum 2007). In the distant socialist ideal, they were open to the possibility of equal remuneration for all workers, and Mill was attracted to Comte’s idea that “we should regard working for the benefit of others as a good in itself . . . we should desire it for its own sake, and not for the sake of remuneration” (Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 340; Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 210; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 254-255; McCabe 2021). In that ideal, they also entertained the elimination of private property altogether—certainly in land—and hoped for a future based rather on a principle of “community” (Mill, Letter to Frederick J. Furnivall [1], 50-51; McCabe 2021).

Mill supported workers’ rights groups over many years. George Holyoake, a leader of the worker cooperative movement, wrote: “Of all the public men whom I can recall, there have been none, certainly no philosophers, who personally cared for the people as he did” (Holyoake 1873, 4). But, although Mill was familiar with Blanc and other socialist writers, the evidence suggests that he did not know Karl Marx (1818-1883) personally. Marx had moved to London in 1849 and lived there until his death. But his leading works were written in German and he did not become well-known beyond small radical circles until the late nineteenth century, after his death. That said, we know that Marx read Mill and that Mill was aware of different factions within the International Working Men’s Association, which suggests that he was familiar with some of Marx’s revolutionary rhetoric from its proceedings (McCabe 2021, 97-98; Persky 2016, 155-168). Although Mill supported the association’s principles, he came to worry that the more revolutionary factions within it were animated by “hate” and unreasonably placed their faith “in the hope that out of chaos would arise a better Kosmos” (Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 749; Mill, Letter to Thomas Smith, 1911; Mill, Letter to Georg Brandes, 1874-1875).

Mill and Taylor also thought that any socialist reforms must remain consistent with core liberal principles, including those allowing for individuality and “experiments of living” (Mill [and Taylor Mill], *On Liberty*, 260-275). Despite their rejection of *laissez-faire*, they worried whether “there would be any asylum left for individuality of character” under a fully “communistic regime” (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 209; Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 737-749). They therefore took a progressive approach to change in England, starting with reforms achievable in the near term that might (or might not) lead to others in the distant ideal (McCabe 2021).

Finally, a remarkable feature of Mill’s political economy is the extent to which it addresses considerations commonly grouped under the heading of “sustainability ethics,” including all of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (Gehrlich 2022). He was arguably the first theorist to treat them as an integrated set of issues, tying environmental commitments to an agenda supporting social and political equality, including women’s reproductive rights (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 372; Mill, Letter to J.K. Hamilton Willcox, 1801). This emerged over time, but even his arrest at the age of seventeen for distributing birth control literature reflected three of his abiding concerns: women’s rights, the detrimental effects of overpopulation on workers’ wages, and environmental conservation. Deeply affected by the writings of Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) on overpopulation, Mill nevertheless disagreed with those like Malthus who saw birth control as unnatural: “To check population is not more unnatural than to make use of an umbrella” (Mill, Question of Population [1], 85, 90-91; Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 351-352; Gehrlich 2022, 7-17). By 1866, his combined interests in well-being and the environment would form a comprehensive agenda: “[W]e are brought within sight of the practical questions which will have to be faced when the multiplied human race shall have taken full possession of the earth (and exhausted its principal fuel)” (Mill, Letter to Henry Samuel Chapman, 1137).

Mill articulated an early vision of a steady-state economy with a stable population called the “stationary state” (Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 752-757). He also argued that society had obligations to future generations (Mill, The Malt Duty, 69-73; Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 333-334). And his support for property reforms in land partly aimed to advance environmental conservation: “The desire to engross the whole surface of the earth in the mere production of the greatest possible quantity of food & the materials of manufacture, I consider to be founded on a mischievously narrow conception of the requirements of human nature.” (Mill, Letter to Arthur Lankester, 1141; Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 756). Mill’s stepson Algernon Taylor would recall him as a passionate “lover of nature”: “For him the many-tinted beauty of the woods—the majesty of the mountains—the vastness and ceaseless roll of the ocean—the ever-changing forms and colours of cloud scenery—were a source of untiring observation and never-failing delight; so much so, indeed, as to constitute appreciation and enjoyment of nature one of his most remarkable characteristics” (Taylor 1892, 184). For many years Mill also subscribed, and in his will left a significant sum, to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, although he distanced himself from some of their efforts because they refrained criticizing the wealthy elite (Mill, Letter to John Colam, 1424).

4. IMPACT

Mill is arguably the central figure of the liberal political tradition. *On Liberty* is admired across the political spectrum for its articulation of many of the core commitments of an open society. *Utilitarianism* remains one of the core texts in the Western canon of moral philosophy. For these reasons, his philosophy will endure. Nevertheless, many students have struggled to weave together Mill's liberal and utilitarian commitments, let alone his qualified endorsement of socialism. Those who focus on *On Liberty* have sometimes mislabeled him as someone for whom liberty takes priority over happiness as a foundational principle. And many readers of *Utilitarianism* treat the view in over-simple terms that Mill (and other leading utilitarians) would reject as a misunderstanding. Going beyond *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*, then, Mill's writings about epistemology, progress, organization, equality, sustainability, and the Art of Life reveal a complex, but coherent, understanding of his moral and political philosophy, one with many insights for today. His impact is likely to increase as societies grapple with the full range of issues he considered. Mill was not only one of the great philosophers, but one of the great public advocates for progressive reform.

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