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JOHN STUART MILL

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John Stuart Mill, the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century, is today best remembered as the author of *On Liberty*. The work is, he notes, a “kind of philosophic textbook of a single truth” – one in which he argues, relentlessly and over the course of around 50,000 words, that there should be no interference with the thought, speech, or action of any individual except on the grounds of the prevention of harm to others. That prohibition applies to legislative or state action, but also to those informal modes of coercion that can be practised by society itself. And the ban is total. “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” Though occasionally challenged by the collectivist left, the position Mill argues for has become orthodoxy in modern Anglo-American political thought.

But while liberalism *itself* remains pre-eminent, Mill’s arguments for that position have fallen out of sight in recent discussions. In contrast to many contemporary thinkers, Mill’s defence of liberal principles is historical and local – not abstract and universal. Whereas the prevailing wisdom maintains that individuals possess certain rights to free speech and action simply by virtue of their status as human beings, Mill was suspicious of that claim. As a robust naturalist – one who believed only in those objects discovered by observation or the methods of empirical science – Mill could not

accept the idea of rights which attach to every human being but were wholly imperceptible to the senses. Nor could he agree with those who, like the US Founding Fathers, held that our possession of certain unalienable rights was “self-evident”. If such rights genuinely *were* self-evident, he notes, there would hardly be so much disagreement about them.

Mill’s argument for the principle of liberty is based on an observation about the conditions most conducive to flourishing in societies that have reached a certain level of civilization. Given the level of moral and intellectual cultivation achieved in Western Europe – modest, Mill suggests, but not insignificant – a robust atmosphere of freedom is indispensable for the advancement of knowledge and the achievement of happiness. In the modern era, individuals have reached a level of intellectual maturity such that they themselves are the best judges of their own good, and are best equipped to appreciate and understand the truth only when they hear all sides of an argument. It is this which justifies an absolute protection of free speech and self-regarding action – not our possession of some abstract entitlement to non-interference.

The argument, we should note, is utilitarian in orientation. It appeals to a claim about the conditions that will lead to overall happiness, given how human beings now are. This mode of argument is, of course, double-edged

– for in the process of offering a vindication of liberal rights here and now, it also implies that, where different circumstances obtain, those same liberties might not be justified. While individuals in “civilized” societies thrive in an atmosphere that protects rights of freedom, for nations that belong to a “barbarous state”, he writes, the best thing would be “obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one”. The suggestion that liberal rights are suitable only for societies that have reached a certain level of development is likely to strike us as blinkered – and it is certainly true that we should be suspicious of the Victorian confidence with which Mill categorizes entire nations as “barbarous” or “civilized”. But the underlying thought – that one and the same set of norms might not have the same effects if embedded in different settings – does have the virtue of being attentive to the reality of the historical emergence of liberal societies.

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The utilitarianism that Mill deployed in arguing for the value of freedom was, primarily, a product of his upbringing in the Enlightenment tradition of Jeremy Bentham. Bentham had proposed, a generation earlier, what he termed “the greatest happiness principle” – that actions or policies should be judged moral to the extent that they contribute to the total sum of pleasure in the world – and applied it enthusiastically to criticize the archaic laws and religious beliefs of eighteenth-century England. With Enlightenment optimism, Bentham declared that all that was necessary to unleash human potential was to sweep away corrupted institutions and replace them with ones designed to maximize happiness.

Mill agreed with Bentham’s criticisms of eighteenth-century England, which of course

took place in the context of a broader European deconstruction of the *ancien régime*. In his early twenties, however, Mill had been heavily influenced by the Romantic tradition, absorbing the writings of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle. This work left him feeling that although Bentham had been right in his endorsement of the greatest happiness principle, like the French *philosophes*, his understanding of human nature, and therefore his application of that principle, had been naive. “He knew no dejection, no heaviness of heart”, Mill commented. “He never felt life a sore and a weary burthen. He was a boy to the last.” Mill’s goal would be to reconcile the insights of Bentham with the nineteenth-century poets. This would, in practice, amount to nothing less than the attempt to reconcile the Enlightenment and Romantic visions of man. “Whoever could master the premises and combine the methods of both”, he thought, “would possess the entire English philosophy of their age.”

Mill’s effort to combine Enlightenment and Romantic thought reached into every area of his philosophy. The Enlightenment tradition, broadly speaking, had endorsed a scientific worldview in which man was wholly governed by the causal regularities observable in nature. Mill thought this view quite correct – but he also felt keenly the Romantic concern that this “mechanical philosophy” threatened to render human beings as passive. If man was subject to invariable laws, how could he be viewed as being capable of *self-guided* action? Mill’s solution was to maintain that human beings were subject to deterministic laws, but to point to their ability to influence their own character. Individuals’ actions might be solely a product of their character and environment, but they could act to progressively alter their characters and thereby control their future actions if they so desired. Indeed, increased

knowledge of the deterministic laws of psychology would – by revealing the mechanisms of the formation of character – allow us to better understand how to cultivate strong-willed individuals capable of self-governance. “Out of mechanical premises”, he wrote to Carlyle, “I elicit dynamical conclusions.”

Mill’s dynamic view of man led him, as a utilitarian, to prize those forms of happiness involving self-development and genuine engagement with the world. Such a conception of utility was at the root of his arguments for liberty. Whereas Bentham had seen all pleasures as on a par – “prejudice apart, the game of push-pin”, he had written, with reference to a children’s game of the period, “is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry” – Mill viewed pleasures actively taken in the world as more valuable than those received passively. Such “higher” pleasures resulted from the self-directed use of our distinctively human capacities, and were to be preferred over the “lower” pleasures which involved merely the use of our animal faculties. They included, he thought, the pleasures of intellectual and aesthetic involvement. The influence of the Romantics was again significant.

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Mill’s reflections on the superiority of some forms of pleasure took place in the context of society trying quickly to come to terms with its own changing economic and social identity. The Industrial Revolution and the Great Reform Act of 1832 had ushered in a new era in Great Britain – and both foretold of further changes that would be even more dramatic. Such developments were, in Mill’s view, inevitable. Wealth, education, status and therefore power, he held, were amassing with a socially and politically dominant middle class, whose shared commercial traits and interests dictated equality as the emerging rule. The “irresistible

tendency to equality of conditions” would soon impact all aspects of human life.

Most directly, he anticipated, these changes would impact structures of governance. In the context of the growth of equality, various existing forms of political inequality stood out all the more clearly – in particular, the denial of the vote to women – and the time was therefore ripe to dismantle such practices of discrimination. As such Mill argued vigorously, both as a philosopher and as a Member of Parliament, for the enfranchisement of women. The denial of the vote to women not only meant that their interests were unrepresented in the national political conversation, but also that they were denied access to the important goods of political participation. “[A]n equal right to be heard – to have a share in influencing the affairs of the country – to be consulted, to be spoken to, and to have agreements and considerations turning upon politics addressed to one – tended to elevate and educate.” Such goods, he argued, were pivotal to leading a happy life, and should be made available to all.

Witnessing the progress of democratic sentiments throughout the nineteenth century, though, Mill also worried deeply about the levelling effects that might result from these changes: with the growth of equality, he thought, came a suspicion of the superior and a veneration of the average. Deference to the majority on political matters, Mill held, inevitably pushed towards deference to the majority on questions of value and the intellect more generally – and this could lead to mediocrity and the debasement of high ideals. With democracy, then, came the serious danger of cultural decline. That concern seemed to become all the more real as the effects of industrial capitalism were gradually played out, and it was shared by other thinkers of the period: most prominently, of course, Friedrich Nietzsche.

Mill ultimately remained optimistic about the possibility of maintaining high culture in

conditions of equality, however. “It is the honour and glory of the average man”, he wrote, “that he can respond internally to wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open.” He was conscious, though, that effort is required to preserve this ability – that the human facility to discriminate the true and valuable from the merely widespread and popular was not natural, innate, or guaranteed. Only

by education, he suggested, could that ability be cultivated in a democratic public and passed on to future generations. The problem, of course, would become whether democratic society’s commitment to education could be sufficiently self-sustaining to guard against the descent into populism. That is a question that remains very much with us.