British philosopher, a key figure in the classical school of economics. He suggested the need for a stationary or steady-state economy; this laid the foundation for ecological economists of the present day to argue that population growth, resource depletion, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic inequalities demand a steady state (as opposed to a growth economy).

John Stuart Mill (1806–73) changed the way in which the modern world views, and legal systems address, the issues of individual liberty of thought, expression, lifestyle, and action. His ideas remain both influential and controversial to this day.

Life
Mill was born in London as the oldest of nine children and had to endure a most unusual childhood. His father, James Mill, was a popularizer of the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, and it was for the promulgation of these views that John Stuart was trained. He was educated with an intensity that gave him, as he himself put it, a quarter of a century ascendancy over his contemporaries. This advantage was costly to Mill, for it involved a childhood without playthings, without holidays, and although he did have eight younger siblings—from whom he seems to have been distant—without the company of children of his own age. The last deprivation would have been impossible had he gone to school, but no school would have imposed the regime that his father desired, and so James Mill educated his son himself. Consequently, John Stuart commenced learning Greek at the age of three and Latin at the age of eight. Clearly, Mill's distance from the norms of his time was immense. In an age of widespread illiteracy, he was highly educated, just as in an age of widespread religious observance, he was thoroughly secular. At the age of 13, he was sent for a year to France with the family of Samuel Bentham, the brother of Jeremy. Here he enjoyed a more relaxed atmosphere than at home and, more significantly, commenced a lifelong path of sympathetic engagement with French thought, which later included correspondence with Alexis de Tocqueville and Auguste Comte.

In 1823, at the age of 17, Mill followed his father into the British East India Company, as he had earlier followed him into utilitarianism. He rose high in the company, attaining his father's previous position of Chief Examiner. As well as clearly satisfying his employers, Mill somehow found both the time and energy necessary for his various literary and political aspirations. During his 35 years with the East India Company, he engaged in numerous journalistic campaigns, was founder and editor of the *London and Westminster Review* (1836–40), and wrote two of the major textbooks of the century in their respective fields, *A System of Logic* (1843) and *The Principles of Political Economy* (1848).

After the 1857 Indian Mutiny, the British government felt it necessary to take India under direct state control. Mill led the opposition to this move, fearing that it would lead to policy on India determined by party political considerations. He refused the offer of a job on the new advisory council for India and, at
the age of 52, accepted retirement. This decision was, however, far from the end of his working life, for he now published his most influential political writings, *On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1861), *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), and *The Subjection of Women* (1869). He also became the Liberal Member of Parliament for Westminster between 1865 and 1868, where he is best remembered for proposing an amendment to the 1867 Reform Act that, had it been accepted, would have given votes to women.

Mill's personal life became more public than he would have liked. Harriet Taylor, who inclined toward feminism and socialism, was a married woman when she met Mill in 1830. She was nevertheless intellectually available, in that she had decided that her husband, the pharmacist John Taylor, was her mental inferior. She bore him two sons and a daughter, but he bored her. Mill did not, so Harriet and Mill became regular companions. Mill dined at the Taylor household once or twice a week. John Taylor was amazingly tolerant of this development, but unsurprisingly, friends and acquaintances began to gossip. So it went on until 1849 when Taylor died. Two years later, Harriet and Mill married. Their time living together was all too brief; Harriet died of tuberculosis in Avignon, France, on November 3, 1858.

**Early Thought**

In his *Autobiography*, Mill acknowledged the influence on him of the socialistic Saint-Simonian school in France. He recalled being “greatly struck with the connected view which they for the first time presented to me, of the natural order of human progress; and especially with their division of all history into organic periods and critical periods” (Mill 1981, vol. xxiii, 171). This classification is evident in Mill's first major journalism, his five articles on “The Spirit of the Age” that appeared in *The Examiner* in 1831. Their main theme was that society was suffering the disabilities of a transitional state. The old ideas no longer carried conviction. The constituted authorities no longer commanded respect. Power was held by those unfit to exercise it. Authority and ability no longer coincided. Old institutions and doctrines had fallen into well-deserved disgrace. Society had to change so that expertise was elevated to the superior position that its merits deserved.

In 1823, Mill had formed the Utilitarian Society and yet soon thereafter became ambivalent about his intellectual heritage. His famous mental crisis of 1826–27 may be seen as a process that led to him gaining a broader philosophical outlook. He dared not openly criticize Bentham while James Mill was still alive, but in 1833, he wrote an anonymous appendix to E. Lytton Bulwer's *England and the English*. Here he stated that Bentham was not a profound analyst of human nature, had too little knowledge of other people's writings, omitted the importance of conscience, and overstated selfish motives.

In 1836, James Mill died. His son was now free to say openly what he thought, and in 1838 and 1840, he published what may be regarded as companion pieces on “Bentham” and “Coleridge.” For Mill, Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge represented polar opposites; one was a representative of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the other of the reaction against it. They were the two great English minds of their age. Although Bentham is acknowledged as a great thinker, what is more striking is the extent to which Mill bit the hand that had fed him. He noted that Bentham had no interest in other thinkers, a limited notion of human nature, no sense of the importance of honor and duty, and nothing to say on how humankind might improve itself. Equally striking, but even more upsetting for his radical friends, was Mill's appreciation of Coleridge. Mill presented the mentality of the Enlightenment as one-sided, good for demolition, and imaginative in its models for society, but neglectful of the factors that held society together. Mill clearly appreciated Coleridge's idea of a clerisy, especially on the
understanding that it need not necessarily be a religious organization.

Mill's *A System of Logic* went into eight editions, including, surprisingly, a cheap edition for the working classes. Its main concern was to refute the intuitionist philosophy that downplayed, or even denied, the role of experience in discovering truths and was, Mill thought, the basis of conservative attitudes. He also wanted to refute the determinism of the Owenites and assert the existence of free will. There was a personal motive behind this intent in that Mill had been described by critics as a “manufactured man.” After his mental crisis, he felt that he had been able to develop beyond the conditioning of his childhood. It was all a matter of determination. People could make or reform their own character if they truly had the will to do so. This freedom of the individual also applied to social classes and societies; they could all improve and escape from their limitations and backwardness if they chose to do so. This apparent distinctiveness of human agents sits uneasily with Mill's simultaneous assertion that the method of the social and the physical sciences was one and the same.

In terms of political theory, the book's most interesting sections deal with the nature of the social sciences and historical change. In this area, one of the main influences was Auguste Comte, with whom Mill had an intense but fairly brief correspondence in the 1840s. Mill fell out with Comte over the latter's views on female inferiority and described his system as “liberticide” (Mill 1972, vol. xiv, 294); yet he remained impressed with his delineation of humanity advancing through theological, metaphysical, and positivist stages. Mill was concerned with many of the same intellectual problems as Comte. For example, he believed that the basic issue in the social sciences was to uncover the law by which one type of society produces its successor. In Mill's view, the basic cause of social development was intellectual: Advances of knowledge led to all other kinds of progress. This concern clearly links Mill not only with Comte, but also with three other founders of sociology, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, and Émile Durkheim. Like both Comte and Marx, Mill looked for two kinds of empirical laws of society, exactly similar to what Comte called social statics and social dynamics. Unlike them, however, he was no determinist; the future held out possibilities rather than certainties.

Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* was one of the basic economic textbooks of its century, with seven editions published between 1848 and Mill's death in 1873. For Mill, a competitive market economy leads to the most efficient use of resources, so he wanted the market principle extended into all areas where it might bring benefit. In its contemporary context, this belief had an anti-aristocratic thrust, for legal patterns stemming from feudal roots still protected some landed estates from the full force of the market economy. Mill instanced the existence in law of entails, by which inheritance was predetermined. The result was that an heir assured of his inheritance was likely to grow up lazy. Land was most likely to be used productively when it was an object of commerce. In Mill's view, competition cheapened the product and was a stimulus to progress. In contrast, those protected against competition were likely to become idle and unintelligent.

Competition, then, has a salutary influence on people's morality. Where, however, Mill asked, was the competitive society going? Could it progress indefinitely? Mill had learned from David Ricardo that the return on capital tends to diminish and so economic development could not continue indefinitely. For Adam Smith and Ricardo, this conclusion was disturbing. For Mill, on the contrary, the stationary state was to be welcomed. Competition was not the be all and end all of life, nor was the pursuit of material success. The virtues of the market society were now becoming overwhelmed by their attendant vices. Material progress had its vital part to play in bringing backward societies into the modern age but should not be mistaken for progress as such. With the problem of productivity solved and with the economy

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stationary, there would still be as much scope as ever for moral and intellectual progress.

So the market economy could safely be left to run its downward course, although any departure from it, through state intervention, was permissible only if clearly for the general good. Mill was in principle suspicious of the state, which already had too much power and too extensive an influence. Officials, even of a democratic state, could be just as tyrannical as those of a despotic one. Mill thought that people understood their own business better than the government could, and that most things are done worse by government than they would be by the individuals most concerned with the matter. Furthermore, and crucially, the greater the government activity, the less scope remains for individual exertion and self-improvement. Such individual activity should have both proper scope and its own reward. Mill, consequently, opposed a progressive income tax, which he thought would merely impose a penalty on those who had worked harder or saved more diligently than others.

Although Mill clearly wanted to hold the state at bay, he found that principle continually retreated before expediency. The areas of legitimate state action seemed to grow, while his empirical examples of improper interference remained few. Mill was suspicious of the state but committed to personal self-development and found that the latter came to require the former, for individual prosperity required an infrastructure of, at least, law and order, a currency, standard weights and measures, as well as roads and canals. It was necessary that education be made compulsory, children be safeguarded, and the mentally ill be cared for. Also, infant industries might need protection. The functions of the state, then, are either prohibitive or facilitative. The boundary of its activities could not be determined by a principle about its own intrinsic scope but by whether it augments or retards personal development. In this way, Mill started along the path that, later in the century, led to the “New Liberalism” of Thomas Hill Green, J. A. Hobson, Leonard Hobhouse, and Herbert Croly. On the insistence of his wife, Mill included a chapter in *Political Economy* called “On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes.” It needs saying that the socialism with which he came to sympathize was not that of the twentieth-century centralized state, but of small, relatively egalitarian communities of voluntary participants. He gave further consideration to these ideas in his “Chapters on Socialism,” written in 1869 but not published until 1879, six years after his death.

**On Liberty**

Mill’s most enduring work is *On Liberty*, whose main theme concerns the threat to individuality in the age of mass society. In terms of individuality, Mill was concerned with the problem of when society could rightly interfere with the individual. This question led him to draw a distinction between two kinds of action: self-regarding and other-regarding. Only in the latter case had society a right to interfere with individual actions. Contemporary and later critics have found it hard to draw a clear dividing line between these two kinds of action. For example, as Mill realized, taking drugs might seem like a self-regarding action, but it can lead to personal disablement that has the other-regarding consequences of family stress and strains and costs on the welfare services. What remains significant is Mill’s pioneering attempt to establish proper limits to social and political interference.

Mill not only defined liberty negatively as consisting in the absence of outside pressures, but also he added a positive side. This consisted of liberty as the free exercise of rationality. This need, he said, was a human requirement. Rationality, however, was not equally attainable by everyone. Some people are not yet fit for liberty. In his *Autobiography*, Mill asserted that representative democracy was not an absolute principle. Its application was a matter of time, place, and circumstances. Mill, then, may be
described as a developmental liberal in that peoples qualify for the liberal rights and freedoms only when they attain a fairly high level of general development. In the first chapter of *On Liberty*, he explicitly left out of account backward societies still at early stages of development.

Mill is perhaps most widely known for his argument on freedom of thought. His striking basic statement on this is the following:

*If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.*

(As quoted in S. Collini 1989, 20)

Mill then provided a number of justifications, of varying plausibility, for his position: that to silence an opinion is to rob the human race; that the opinion we wish to suppress might actually be right; that even false opinions have a positive function in forcing people to defend their beliefs; and that we can never be fully certain that the opinions we wish to suppress are false and ours are valid. Finally, Mill made a partial withdrawal. He now considered the possible social consequences of free speech and decided that in some cases law and order had priority. Opinions, then, should still be free, but their expression should be limited if they were likely to have sufficiently detrimental consequences in practice.

In 1835 and 1840, Mill had reviewed the two volumes of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and thereby did much to make the work known and appreciated in Britain. Mill himself was much influenced by Tocqueville’s analysis of mass society. This was a condition in which the old social gradations were breaking down. Individuals were no longer members of a particular class or group but of society in general. An atomized society was emerging in which individuals became lost in the crowd. Mediocrity was becoming the dominant power. Some commentators have seen this concern as an opposition to rising working-class influence. Mill certainly did not want the uneducated to have equal voting rights, but here he was explicit regarding to whom he was referring. In England, public opinion was that of the middle class and in America that of the white population. Either way it was a collective, mediocre mass. Liberty’s old enemies were located at the apex of society: kings, governments, and churches. The new enemy was in the middle of the social pyramid. This change of opponent could lead to liberty’s defenders being caught off their guard by the change of direction from which the current danger came. Mill thought the threat mattered for two reasons. First, liberty was a requirement of human nature. He described human nature as like a tree whose basic forces require it to grow. Second, liberty was the basic prerequisite for social development. In Mill’s view, everything that had elevated European societies above the barbarians was a consequence of allowing freedom of opinion. A threat to this was a threat to European civilization itself. Europe’s progress, then, derived from its diversity but was now endangered. Mill reminded his readership of the fate of China. Here was an ancient civilization that had at one time achieved considerable progress, but it had ossified at the point when freedom was curtailed. China, then, had become a backwater; world development had passed it by. For Mill, this analysis was the prelude to a call for action. Individuals should fight back against the pressures to conformity. Even eccentricity, every refusal to bend the knee, was a service in the battle against the stifling pressures of mass society.

**Later Writings**

An application of some of Mill’s ideas on freedom to one specific problem is his *The Subjection of
Women, a bold work given the prevailing climate of opinion, and one that exposed him to considerable ridicule. It was also his only book that lost money for the original publisher, although it later became accepted as a feminist classic. Mill believed that after food and clothing, freedom was our strongest need. Freedom, however, was denied to half the species, to women. Mill instanced the situation where in Britain the children and property of a marriage legally belonged to the husband and noted that women had only limited access to higher education. They also had no vote, for Mill had failed in his attempt to amend the 1867 Second Reform Bill so as to grant them the vote on the same terms as men. In the decade when slavery had been abolished in the United States, Mill declared that a wife was a slave in the fullest sense of the word.

In Mill's view, the inferior status of women had originated in conquest. It was the sole surviving legacy of the anachronistic law of the strongest. Women's inferior legal status, then, was a consequence of their lesser physical stature, for when law first emerged, it had sanctioned prevailing relationships. This era, of course, was such a long time ago that women's lower status had come to seem natural, often even to women themselves. But, argued Mill, “What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing” (as quoted in S. Collini 1989, 138). Mill's basic position was that, unlike what had happened previously, the relationship between the sexes should be based on complete equality. He also hinted at the importance of feminism for the solution of the Malthusian problem.

In his essay “Utilitarianism,” Mill attempted to meet the criticism that the doctrine was a hedonistic one worthy only of swine. On sheer quantities of pleasure, it might appear that a pig, well fed and lacking ethical qualms, would score higher than Socrates on the felicific calculus. This conclusion would be a humiliating moment for Western philosophy. Mill rescued Socrates on the basis that his pleasures, although less clearly apparent than those of the swine, are nevertheless of a higher qualitative order and that this elevation gives them a greater weighting. Mill's positing, then, of a quality axis in addition to the quantity one represents a significant break from, and complication of, Bentham's egalitarian formulation that each person is the best judge of his or her own happiness; in other words, the source of pleasure is irrelevant in terms of its value.

The designation of utilitarianism as a doctrine worthy only of swine, attributed to Thomas Carlyle, relates to the obvious selfishness of pursuing solely one's own happiness. Where does this criticism leave Bentham's pursuit of the greatest happiness of the greatest number? It would seem that here we have two different and potentially contrasting motivations. Mill sought to resolve them by saying that as between the two aims, one should judge in an impartial way. This view, of course, clashes with a basic tenet of natural justice: that one cannot be a neutral judge in one's own case. So, on some accounts, Mill's attempts to rescue utilitarianism from obvious objections merely landed it in still greater difficulties.

In Considerations on Representative Government, Mill applied some of his earlier concerns to an increasingly democratic political system. Thus, he advocated proportional representation as a means of protecting minority opinions, and in order to defend quality against quantity, he argued that the franchise should not extend to the illiterate, to those receiving welfare, or to nontaxpayers. In pursuit of the liberal ideal of equal opportunities, he also called for competitive entry into the Civil Service, a reform introduced ten years later.

Mill is now widely regarded as the greatest nineteenth-century liberal thinker. During his lifetime, however, there was more respect for his intellect than for his opinions. In a number of ways, he
seemed dangerously radical. For example, he made scathing comments about the aristocracy, approved of the French revolutions of 1830 and 1848, had no obvious religious beliefs, and sympathized with the grievances of the Irish, with the North in the U.S. Civil War, and with socialistic experiments. He also had what seemed at the time to be ridiculous and dangerous views on sexual equality. In some ways, Mill was, as he himself believed, ahead of his time. What remains most valued and timely today is his defense of individuality and free speech. Perhaps no thinker has more influenced modern systems of law in specifying the limits of the government's proper powers over individuals. Mill's most obvious sectarian influence is the various libertarian movements and political parties around the world, especially in the United States. More generally, the essence of liberalism is the right to be different in nonharmful ways, and that right is the core of what Mill was trying to defend.

See also Bentham, Jeremy; Empire and Political Thought; English Enlightenment; Feminism; Freedom of Expression; Liberalism; Liberty, Theories of; Malthus, Thomas Robert; Mill, James; Nineteenth-Century Political Thought; Progress; Republicanism; Scottish Enlightenment; Socialism; State, Theories of the; Tocqueville, Alexis de; Utilitarianism

Further Readings


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