

John Stuart Mill (1806-73)

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Biography

John Stuart Mill, Britain's major philosopher of the nineteenth century, gave formulations of his country's empiricist and liberal traditions of comparable importance to those of John Locke. His distinctive contribution was to bring those traditions into contact with the ideas of nineteenth-century Europe. He impressively united the radicalism of enlightenment reason with the historical and psychological insights of nineteenth-century romanticism and he infused English liberalism with high Romantic notions of culture and character.

Mill held that all knowledge is based on experience, believed that our desires, purposes and beliefs are products of psychological laws of association, and accepted Bentham's standard of the greatest total happiness of all beings capable of happiness - the principle of 'utility'. This was Mill's enlightenment legacy; he infused it with high Romantic notions of culture and character.

In epistemology Mill's empiricism was very radical. He drew a distinction between 'verbal' and 'real' propositions similar to that which Kant made between analytic and synthetic judgments. However, unlike Kant, Mill held that not only pure mathematics but logic itself contains real propositions and inferences, and unlike Kant, he denied that any synthetic, or real, proposition is a priori. The sciences of logic and mathematics, according to Mill, propound the most general laws of nature and, like all other sciences, are in the last resort grounded inductively on experience.

We take principles of logic and mathematics to be a priori because we find it inconceivable that they should not be true. Mill acknowledged the facts which underlie our conviction, facts about unthinkability or imaginative unrepresentability, and he sought to explain these facts in associationist terms. He thought that we are justified in basing logical and mathematical claims on such facts about what is thinkable - but the justification is itself a posteriori.

What then is the nature and standing of induction? Mill held that the primitive form of induction is enumerative induction, simple generalization from experience. He did not address Hume's sceptical problem about enumerative induction. Generalization from experience is our primitive inferential practice and remains our practice when we become reflectively conscious of it - in Mill's view nothing more needs to be said or can be said. Instead he traced how enumerative induction is internally strengthened by its actual success in establishing regularities, and how it eventually gives rise to more searching methods of inductive inquiry, capable of detecting regularities where enumerative induction alone would not suffice. Thus whereas Hume raised sceptical questions about induction, Mill pushed through an empiricist analysis of deduction. He recognized as primitively legitimate only the disposition to rely on memory and the disposition to generalize from experience. The whole of science, he thought, is built from these.

In particular, he did not accept that the mere fact that a hypothesis accounts for data can ever provide a reason for thinking it true (as opposed to thinking it useful). It is always possible that a body of data may be explained equally well by more than one hypothesis. This view, that enumerative induction is the only authoritative source of general truths, was also important in his metaphysics. Accepting as he did that our knowledge of supposed objects external to consciousness consists only in the conscious states they excite in us, he concluded that external objects amount only to 'permanent possibilities of sensation'. The possibilities are 'permanent' in the sense that they can be relied on to obtain if an antecedent condition is realized. Mill was the founder of modern phenomenalism.

In ethics, Mill's governing conviction was that happiness is the sole ultimate human end. As in the case of induction, he appealed to reflective agreement, in this case of desires rather than reasoning dispositions. If happiness was not 'in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so' (1861a: 234). But he acknowledged that we can will to do what we do not desire to do; we can act from duty, not desire. And he distinguished between desiring a thing as 'part' of our happiness and desiring it as a means to our happiness. The virtues can become a part of our happiness, and for Mill they ideally should be so. They have a natural base in our psychology on which moral education can be built. More generally, people can reach a deeper understanding of happiness through education and experience: some forms of happiness are inherently preferred as finer by those able to experience them fully.

Thus Mill enlarged but retained Bentham's view that the happiness of all, considered impartially, is the standard of conduct. His account of how this standard relates to the fabric of everyday norms was charged with the nineteenth century's historical sense, but also maintained links with Bentham. Justice is a class of exceptionally stringent obligations on society - it is the 'claim we have on our fellow-creatures to join in making safe for us the very groundwork of our existence' (1865b: 25). Because rights of justice protect this groundwork they take priority over the direct pursuit of general utility as well as over the private pursuit of personal ends.

Mill's doctrine of liberty dovetails with this account of justice. Here he appealed to rights founded on 'utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being' (1859: 224). The principle enunciated in his essay *On Liberty* (1859) safeguards people's freedom to pursue their own goals, so long as they do not infringe on the legitimate interests of others: save in backward 'states of society', power should not be exercised over people for their own good. Mill defended the principle on two grounds. It enables individuals to realize their potential in their own distinctive way, and, by liberating talents, creativity and energy, it institutes the social conditions for the moral development of culture and character.

1. Life

Mill was born in London on the 20 May 1806, the eldest son of a Scotsman, James Mill, and an English woman, Harriet Burrow. James educated his son himself – an education made famous by the account John Stuart gave of it in his *Autobiography* (1873). He taught John the classics,

logic, political economy, jurisprudence and psychology – starting with Greek at the age of three. John was brought up in a circle of intellectual and political radicals, friends of his father, which included Jeremy Bentham and David Ricardo. In his twenties (not surprisingly, perhaps) he was afflicted by a deep depression from which he recovered partly through reading poetry. In those and subsequent years he also came to know some of the most interesting younger figures in English politics and culture. These included conservative critics of Benthamism, as well as radical adherents of it.

Mill followed his father into the East India Company, where he became an influential official, resigning only in 1858 when, following the Indian Mutiny, the Company was taken over by the Crown and the governance of India became the direct business of the British State. In 1851 he married Harriet Taylor, who in his own account greatly influenced his social philosophy. In the 1860s he was briefly a member of Parliament, and throughout his life was involved in many radical causes. Among them was his lifelong support for women's rights – see *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

Mill made his philosophical reputation with his *System of Logic*, published in 1843.

The Principles of Political Economy (1848) was a synthesis of classical economics which defined liberal orthodoxy for at least a quarter of a century. His two best-known works of moral philosophy, *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*, appeared later – in 1859 and 1861. But he had been thinking about ethics and politics all his life, and it is his moral and political philosophy which is at present most widely read.

2. Language and logic

Nevertheless, Mill's epistemology and metaphysics remain as interesting and relevant as his better-known views in ethics and politics, and it is from these aspects of his philosophy that a general survey must start. In the *System of Logic* Mill distinguishes 'verbal' and 'real' propositions, and correspondingly, 'merely apparent' and 'real' inferences. An inference is merely apparent when no move to a new assertion has been made. For this to be so, the conclusion must literally have been asserted in the premises. In such a case, there can be no epistemological problem about justifying the apparent inference – there *is* nothing to justify. A verbal proposition can now be defined as a conditional proposition corresponding to a merely apparent inference. Propositions and inferences which are not verbal or merely apparent are real.

Mill argues that not only mathematics but logic itself contains real inferences. To demonstrate this he embarks on a semantic analysis of sentences and terms (he calls them 'propositions' and 'names'), of syllogistic logic and of the so-called 'Laws of Thought'. His analysis has imperfections and he does not unify it in a fully general account, but he supplies the foundations of such an account, and in doing so takes the empiricist epistemology of logic and mathematics to a new level.

The starting point is a distinction between the denotation and connotation of names. Names, which may be general or singular, denote things and connote attributes of things. A general name connotes attributes and denotes each object which has those attributes. Most singular names also connote attributes.

There is, however, an important class of singular names – proper names in the ordinary sense, such as ‘Dartmouth’ – which denote an object without connoting any property (see Proper names §§1, 6). Identity propositions which contain only non-connotative names, such as ‘Tully is Cicero’, are verbal, in Mill’s view. They lack content in the sense that, according to Mill, the only information conveyed is about the names themselves: ‘Tully’ denotes the same object as ‘Cicero’ does. Mill’s point is that there is no fact in the world to which ‘Cicero is Tully’ corresponds. But to class these propositions as verbal would require a change in the characterization of verbal propositions given above. Moreover, knowledge that Cicero is Tully is not a priori. We cannot know the proposition to be true just by reflecting on the meaning of the names – whereas Mill’s overall intention is that the class of verbal propositions should be identical with the class of propositions which are innocuously a prioribecause they are empty of content. He does not comment on these difficulties.

The meaning of a declarative sentence – ‘the import of a proposition’ – is determined by the connotation, not the denotation, of its constituent names; the sole exception being connotationless proper names, where meaning is determined by denotation. (Again Mill does not explain how this thesis about the meaning of proper names is to be reconciled with the a posteriority of ‘Cicero is Tully’.) Mill proceeds to show how the various syntactic forms identified by syllogistic theory yield conditions of truth for sentences of those forms, when the connotation of their constituent names is given.

Armed with this analysis he argues that logic contains real inferences and propositions. He assumes that to assert a conjunction, ‘A and B’, is simply to assert A and to assert B. He defines ‘A or B’ as ‘If not A, then B, and if not B, then A’. ‘If A then B’ means, he thinks, ‘The proposition B is a legitimate inference from the proposition A’. From these claims it follows that certain deductive inferences, for example, from a conjunction to one of its conjuncts, are merely apparent. But, Mill holds, the laws of contradiction and excluded middle are real – and therefore a posteriori – propositions. He takes it that ‘not P’ is equivalent in meaning to ‘It is false that P’; if we further assume the equivalence in meaning of P and ‘It is true that P’, the principle of contradiction becomes, as he puts it, ‘the same proposition cannot at the same time be false and true’. ‘I cannot look upon this’, he says, ‘as a merely verbal proposition’. He makes analogous remarks about excluded middle, which turns – on these definitions – into the principle of bivalence: ‘Either it is true that P or it is false that P’.

Mill adds an epistemological argument to this semantic analysis. If logic did not contain real inferences, all deductive reasoning would be a *petitio principii*, a begging of the question, and it could produce no new knowledge. Yet clearly it does produce new knowledge. So logic must contain real inferences.

Unfortunately, Mill mixes up this epistemological argument with an interesting but distinct objective. He wants to show that ‘all inference is from particulars to particulars’, in order to demystify the role that general propositions play in thought. He argues that in principle they add nothing to the force of an argument; particular conclusions could always be derived inductively direct from particular premises. Their value is psychological. They play the role of ‘memoranda’ or summary records of the inductive potential of all that we have observed, and they facilitate

‘trains of reasoning’ (for example, as in ‘This is A; All As are Bs; No Bs are Cs; so this is not C’). Psychologically they greatly increase our memory and reasoning power, but epistemologically they are dispensable.

This thesis is connected to Mill’s rejection of ‘intuitive’ knowledge of general truths and to his inductivism (see §5 below). But there is also a deeper way in which a radical empiricist must hold that all inference is from particulars to particulars. For consider the inference from ‘Everything is F’ to ‘a is F’. Is it a real or merely apparent inference? It is impossible to hold it real if one also wishes to argue that real inferences are a posteriori. But the only way in which Mill can treat it as verbal is to treat the premise as a conjunction: ‘a is F and b is F and...’. If that approach is precluded, then all that remains is to deny that ‘Everything is F’ is propositional – it must, rather, express an inferential commitment. Both approaches are very close to the surface in Mill’s discussion of the syllogism, though neither emerges clearly.

3. Mathematics

The strategy which Mill applies to mathematics is broadly similar to his approach to logic. If it was merely verbal, mathematical reasoning would be a *petitio principii*, but semantic analysis shows that it contains real propositions.

Mill provides brief but insightful empiricist sketches of geometry and arithmetic. The theorems of geometry are deduced from premises which are real propositions inductively established. (Deduction is itself largely a process of real inference.) These premises, where they are not straightforwardly true of physical space, are true in the limit. Geometrical objects – points, lines, planes – are ideal or ‘fictional’ limits of ideally constructible material entities. Thus the real empirical assertion underlying an axiom such as ‘Two straight lines cannot enclose a space’ is something like ‘The more closely two lines approach absolute breadthlessness and straightness, the smaller the space they enclose’.

Applying his distinction between denotation and connotation, Mill argues that arithmetical identities such as ‘Two plus one equals three’ are real propositions. Number terms denote ‘aggregates’ and connote certain attributes of aggregates. (He does not say that they denote those attributes of the aggregates, though perhaps he should have done.) ‘Aggregates’ are natural, not abstract, entities – ‘collections’ or ‘agglomerations’ individuated by a principle of aggregation. This theory escapes some of the influential criticisms Frege later made of it, but its viability none the less remains extremely doubtful. The respects in which aggregates have to differ from sets if they are to be credibly natural, and not abstract, entities are precisely those in which they seem to fail to produce a fully adequate ontology for arithmetic. (One can, for example, number numbers, but can there be aggregates of aggregates, or of attributes of aggregates, if aggregates are natural entities?)

However this may be, Mill’s philosophical programme is clear. Arithmetic, like logic and geometry, is a natural science, concerning a category of the laws of nature – those concerning aggregation. The fundamental principles of arithmetic and geometry, as well as of logic itself, are real. Mill provides the first thoroughly empiricist analysis of meaning and of deductive reasoning itself.

He distinguishes his view from three others – ‘Conceptualism’, ‘Nominalism’ and ‘Realism’. ‘Conceptualism’ is his name for the view which takes the objects studied by logic to be psychological states or acts. It holds that names stand for ‘ideas’ which make up judgments and that ‘a proposition is the expression of a relation between two ideas’. It confuses logic and psychology by assimilating propositions to judgments and attributes of objects to ideas. Against this doctrine Mill insists that:

All language recognizes a difference between doctrine or opinion, and the fact of entertaining the opinion; between assent, and what is assented to.... Logic, according to the conception here formed of it, has no concern with the nature of the act of judging or believing; the consideration of that act, as a phenomenon of the mind, belongs to another science.

(1843: 87)

The Nominalists – Mill cites Hobbes – hold that logic and mathematics are entirely verbal. Mill takes this position much more seriously than Conceptualism and seeks to refute it in detail. His main point is that Nominalists are only able to maintain their view because they fail to distinguish between the denotation and the connotation of names, ‘seeking for their meaning exclusively in what they denote’ (1843: 91) (see Nominalism §3).

Nominalists and Conceptualists hold that logic and mathematics can be known non-empirically, while yet retaining the view that no real proposition about the world can be so known. Realists hold that logical and mathematical knowledge is knowledge of universals which exist in an abstract Platonic domain; the terms that make up sentences being signs that stand for such universals. Versions of this view were destined to stage a major revival in philosophy, and semantic analysis would be their main source, but it is the view Mill takes least seriously.

In the contemporary use of the term, Mill is himself a nominalist – he rejects abstract entities (see Abstract objects §4). However, just as severe difficulties lie in the way of treating the ontology of arithmetic in terms of aggregates rather than sets, so there are difficulties in treating the ontology of general semantics without appealing to universals and sets, as well as to natural properties and objects. We can have no clear view of how Mill would have responded to these difficulties had they been made evident to him. But we can be fairly sure that he would have sought to maintain his nominalism.

However, his main target is the doctrine that there are real a priori propositions (see A priori). What, he asks, goes on in practice when we hold a real proposition to be true a priori? We find its negation inconceivable, or that it is derived, by principles whose unsoundness we find inconceivable, from premises whose negation we find inconceivable. Mill is not offering a definition of what is meant by such terms as ‘a priori’, or ‘self-evident’; his point is that facts about what we find inconceivable are all that lends colour to the use of these terms.

They are facts about the limits, felt by us from the inside, on what we can imagine perceiving. Mill thought he could explain these facts about unthinkability, or imaginative unrepresentability, in associationist terms, and much of his work claims to do so. This associationist psychology is unlikely nowadays to convince, but that does not affect his essential point: the step from our

inability to represent to ourselves the negation of a proposition, to acceptance of its truth, calls for justification. Moreover, the justification itself must be a priori if it is to show that the proposition is known a priori.

4. 'Psychologism' and naturalism

Mill is often mistakenly accused of 'psychologism' in his treatment of logic – an accusation which seems to go back to Husserl (and one which Frege does not make). 'Psychologism' is the view that laws of logic are psychological laws concerning our mental processes; or that 'meanings' are mental entities, and that 'judgments' assert relationships among these entities. But Mill's view, as we have seen, is that logic and mathematics are the most general empirical sciences, governing *all* phenomena. He explicitly holds that the distinction between necessary and contingent truths, understood 'metaphysically', is empty. And he dismisses the Conceptualist claim that names refer to ideas and propositions express or assert a psychological relation between them.

What explains, then, the attribution of 'psychologism' to Mill? Husserl quotes a passage from An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy (1865a), which has been cited many times since:

Logic is not the theory of Thought as Thought, but of valid Thought; not of thinking, but of correct thinking. *It is not a Science distinct from, and coordinate with Psychology. So far as it is a science at all, it is a part, or branch, of Psychology; differing from it, on the one hand as the part differs from the whole, and on the other, as an Art differs from a Science. Its theoretic grounds are wholly borrowed from Psychology, and include as much of that science as is required to justify the rules of the art.*

(1865a: 359; italics show portion quoted by Husserl)

To give this a psychologistic reading is to take it out of context. Mill means that the logician must formulate rules of reasoning in a manner which will be as helpful as possible to inquirers, and must draw on the psychology of thought to do so. It is in that sense that the art of the logician borrows from the science of the psychologist. How best to promote the art of clear thinking is a psychological question. None the less,

the laws, in the scientific sense of the term, of Thought as Thought – do not belong to Logic, but to Psychology: and it is only the *validity* of thought which Logic takes cognizance of.

(1865a: 359)

So it is wrong to accuse Mill of psychologism about logic. But there is a sense in which his view of our most basic forms of inductive reasoning is psychologistic, or naturalistic. For how does he respond to the Kantian claim that the very possibility of knowledge requires that there be a priori elements in our knowledge? Even if we accept his inductive account of logic and mathematics, must we not accept the principle of induction itself as a priori?

For Mill, the primitive form of reasoning – in both the epistemological and the aetiological sense – is enumerative induction, the disposition to infer that all As are B from the observation of a

number of As which are all B. (Or to the conclusion that a given percentage of all As are B from the observation of that percentage of Bs among a number of As.) We spontaneously agree in reasoning that way, and in holding that way of reasoning to be sound. This method of reasoning, enumerative induction, is not a merely verbal principle. So it cannot on Mill's own account be a priori. Mill says that we learn 'the laws of our rational faculty, like those of every other natural agency', by 'seeing the agent at work'. We bring our most basic reasoning dispositions to self-consciousness by critical reflection on our actual practice. He is right to say that this reflective scrutiny of practice is, in a *certain* sense, an a posteriori process. It examines dispositions which we have before we examine them. Having examined our dispositions, we reach a reflective equilibrium in which we endorse some – and perhaps reject others. We endorse them as sound norms of reasoning. There is nothing more to be said: no further story, platonic or transcendental, to be told.

Unlike Hume, or even Reid, Mill shows no interest at all in scepticism. If one thinks that scepticism is both unanswerable and unserious this may be true philosophic wisdom. But to Mill's epistemological critics, whether they were realists or post-Kantian idealists, it seemed obvious that it was evasion, not wisdom. Naturalism could only seem to differ from scepticism by being uncritical, and in this we find the truth in the allegation that Mill's system of logic is 'psychologistic'; if it is sound criticism, it is sound criticism of all naturalistic epistemology.

5. Inductive science

Mill does not raise purely sceptical questions about simple generalization from experience; he none the less thinks it a highly fallible method. His aim is to show how reasoning methods can evolve from it which greatly reduce the fallibility of induction, even though they can never wholly eliminate it.

Humankind begins with 'spontaneous' and 'unscientific' inductions about particular unconnected natural phenomena or aspects of experience. As these generalizations accumulate and interweave, they justify the second-order inductive conclusion that *all* phenomena are subject to uniformity, and more specifically, that all have discoverable sufficient conditions. In this less vague form, the principle of general uniformity becomes, given Mill's analysis of causation, the Law of Universal Causation. It in turn provides (Mill believes) the grounding assumption for a new style of reasoning about nature – eliminative induction.

In this type of reasoning, the assumption that a type of phenomenon has uniform causes, together with a (revisable) assumption about what its possible causes are, initiates a comparative inquiry in which the actual cause is identified by elimination. Mill formulates the logic of this eliminative reasoning in his well-known 'Methods of Experimental Inquiry' (Chapter 7, Book 2 of *System of Logic*). (A full account is given in Mackie (1974).) His picture of the interplay between enumerative and eliminative reasoning, and of the way it entrenches, from within, our rational confidence in the inductive process, is elegant and penetrating.

The improved scientific induction which results from this new style of reasoning spills back onto the principle of Universal Causation on which it rests, and raises its certainty to a new level. That in turn raises our confidence in the totality of particular enumerative inductions from which the

principle is derived. So the amount of confidence with which one can rely on the 'inductive process' as a whole depends on the point which has been reached in its history – though the confidence to be attached to particular inductions always remains variable.

Mill's inductivism – his view that enumerative induction is the only ultimately authoritative method of inference to new truths – was rejected by William Whewell (see Whewell, W. §2), who argued that the really fundamental method in scientific inquiry was the Hypothetical Method, in which one argues to the truth of a hypothesis from the fact that it would explain observed phenomena (see Inference to the best explanation). Mill had read Whewell's *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837), and could hardly fail to be aware of the pervasiveness of hypotheses in the actual process of inquiry, or of their indispensability in supplying working assumptions – their 'heuristic' value, as Whewell called it. But what Mill could not accept was that the mere fact that a hypothesis accounted for the data in itself provided a reason for thinking it true.

Yet Whewell's appeal was to the actual practice of scientific reasoning, as observed in the history of science. An appeal of that kind was precisely what Mill, on his own principles, could not ignore. If the disposition to hypothesize is spontaneous, why should it not be recognized as a fundamental method of reasoning to truth, as enumerative induction is?

Mill's refusal to recognize it is not arbitrary. The essential point underlying it is a powerful one: it is the possibility that a body of data may be explained equally well by more than one hypothesis. Mill does not deny the increasingly deductive and mathematical organization of science – he emphasizes it. That is quite compatible with his inductivism, and indeed central to his account of the increasing reliability of the inductive process. He further agrees that a hypothesis can sometimes be shown, by eliminative methods of inductive reasoning which he accepts, to be the only one consistent with the facts. And he allows various other cases of apparently purely hypothetical reasoning which are, in his view, genuinely inductive.

When all such cases have been taken into account, we are left with pure cases of the Hypothetical Method, in which the causes postulated are not directly observable, and not simply because they are assumed to operate – in accordance with known laws, inductively established – in regions of time or space too distant to observe. What are we to say of such hypotheses? For example of the 'undulatory' theory of light? They cannot, Mill says, be accepted as inductively established truths, not even as probable ones.

An hypothesis of this kind is not to be received as probably true because it accounts for all the known phenomena; since this is a condition sometimes fulfilled tolerably well by two conflicting hypotheses; while there are probably many others which are equally possible, but which from want of anything analogous in our experience, our minds are unfitted to conceive.

(1843: 500)

Such a hypothesis can suggest fruitful analogies, Mill thinks, but cannot be regarded as yielding a new truth itself. The data do not determine a unique hypothesis: it is this possibility of

underdetermination which stops him from accepting hypothetical reasoning as an independent method of achieving truth.

In seeing the difficulty Mill is certainly on solid ground. What he does not see, however, is how much must be torn from the fabric of our belief if inductivism is applied strictly. So it is an important question whether the difficulty can be resolved – and whether it can be resolved within a naturalistic framework which does not appeal to an underlying idealism, as Whewell did. If naturalism can endorse the hypothetical method, then among other things it can develop a more plausible empiricism about logic and mathematics than Mill's. But the ramifications of his inductivism are even wider, as becomes apparent from an examination of his general metaphysics.

6. Mind and matter

Mill sets out his metaphysical views in *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. Hamilton was the last eminent representative of the Scottish Common Sense School, and a ferocious controversialist – in Mill's eyes a pillar of the right-thinking establishment, ripe for demolition. The result is that Mill's discussion of general metaphysical issues is cast in a highly polemical form which leaves important issues shrouded in obscurity. He does however give himself space to develop his view of our knowledge of the external world.

He begins with a doctrine which he rightly takes to be generally accepted (in his time) on all sides: 'that all the attributes which we ascribe to objects, consist in their having the power of exciting one or another variety of sensation in our minds; that an object is to us nothing else than that which affects our senses in a certain manner' (1865a: 6). This is 'the doctrine of the Relativity of Knowledge to the knowing mind'. It makes epistemology, in Mill's words, the 'Interpretation of Consciousness'. He proceeds to analyse what we mean when we say that objects are external to us:

We mean, that there is concerned in our perceptions something which exists when we are not thinking of it; which existed before we had ever thought of it, and would exist if we were annihilated; and further, that there exist things which we never saw, touched or otherwise perceived, and things which have never been perceived by man. This idea of something which is distinguished from our fleeting impressions by what, in Kantian language, is called Perdurability; something which is fixed and the same, while our impressions vary; something which exists whether we are aware of it or not, constitutes altogether our idea of external substance. Whoever can assign an origin to this complex conception, has accounted for what we mean by the belief in matter.

(1865a: 178–9)

To assign this origin Mill postulates that

we are capable of forming the conception of Possible sensations; sensations which we are not feeling at the present moment, but which we might feel, and should feel if certain conditions were present.

(1865a: 177)

These possibilities, which are conditional certainties, need a special name to distinguish them from mere vague possibilities, which experience gives no warrant for reckoning upon. Now, as soon as a distinguishing name is given, though it be only to the same thing regarded in a different aspect, one of the most familiar experiences of our mental nature teaches us, that the different name comes to be considered as the name of a different thing.

(1865a: 179–80)

Physical objects are ‘Permanent Possibilities of Sensation’ (There is a change in the ‘permanent’ possibilities of sensation whenever there is change in the world. Mill also uses other terms, such as ‘certified’ or ‘guaranteed’.) We often find that whenever a given cluster of certified possibilities of sensation obtains, then a certain other cluster follows. ‘Hence our ideas of causation, power, activity...become connected, not with sensations, but with groups of possibilities of sensation’ (1865a: 181) (see Phenomenalism §1).

However, even if our notion of matter as the external cause of sensations can be explained on psychological principles, it is still possible to hold that good grounds can be given for thinking the notion to have instances. There might be a legitimate inference from the existence of the permanent possibilities and their correlations to the existence of an external cause of our sensations. It is at just this point that Mill’s inductivism plays a part. The inference would be a case of hypothetical reasoning, to an explanation of experience which transcended all possible data of experience; and that is precisely what Mill rejects: ‘I assume only the tendency, but not the legitimacy of the tendency, to extend all the laws of our own experience to a sphere beyond our experience’ (1865a: 187).

If matter is the permanent possibility of sensation what is mind? Can it also be resolved into ‘a series of feelings, with a background of possibilities of feeling’? Mill finds in this view a serious difficulty: to remember or expect a state of consciousness is not simply to believe that it has existed or will exist; it is to believe that *I myself* have experienced or will experience that state of consciousness.

If, therefore, we speak of the Mind as a series of feelings, we are obliged to complete the statement by calling it a series of feelings which is aware of itself as past and future; and we are reduced to the alternative of believing that the Mind, or Ego, is something different from any series of feelings, or possibilities of them, or of accepting the paradox, that something which *ex hypothesi* is but a series of feelings, can be aware of itself as a series.

(1865a: 194)

Thus although Mill is unwilling to accept ‘the common theory of Mind, as a so-called substance’, the self-consciousness involved in memory and expectation drives him to ‘ascribe a reality to the Ego – to my own Mind – different from that real existence as a Permanent Possibility, which is the only reality I acknowledge in Matter’ (1865a: 208).

This ontology, Mill thinks, is consistent with common sense realism about the world. Phenomenalism – the conception of matter as possibility of experience – allegedly leaves common sense and science untouched. In particular, mind and experience is still properly seen as a part of the natural order.

Yet if phenomenalism is right, only the experiences are real. Mill thinks we are led to that conclusion by the very standards of reasoning recognized in a naturalistic ‘science of science’, or ‘system of logic’. If he is right, then the naturalistic vision of the world which sees minds as part of a larger causal order is self-undermining. For if we are led to the conclusion that only states of consciousness are real by *an application of naturalism’s own standards*, then that conclusion has to be understood on the same level as the naturalistic affirmation that states of consciousness are themselves part of a larger causal order external to them – and therefore as inconsistent with it. Causal relations cannot exist between fictional entities which are mere markers for possibilities of sensation.

This is the fault-line in Mill’s epistemology and metaphysics. Either naturalism undermines itself, or there is something wrong with Mill’s inductivist analysis of our natural norms of reasoning, or with his endorsement of the doctrine of the Relativity of Knowledge, or with both. It is not obvious that Mill’s most fundamental tenet – his naturalistic view of the mind – can be safeguarded by rejecting inductivism and endorsing the hypothetical method. There is still something implausible about hypothesizing the world as an explanation of pure experience. Mill himself explicitly acknowledged that memory, as well as induction, has epistemic authority. Had he analysed the significance of such an acknowledgment more thoroughly, he might have noted a parallel: on the one hand a primitive epistemic norm which warrants assertions about the past based on present memory-experiences; on the other, primitive epistemic norms which warrant assertions about the physical world based on perceptual experience. But perhaps that would have taken him too far in the direction of Reid’s principles of common sense.

7. Freedom and the moral sciences

The sixth and last book of the System of Logic is a classical statement of methodology in the ‘moral’ sciences (that is, the human sciences). Its strength derives partly from the fact that Mill was a philosopher who also practised the whole range of these sciences as they then stood. He was mainly known as a political economist, but had strong interests in psychology and in the nascent science of sociology. He thought as an economist as well as a philosopher about socialism, taxation and systems of property, and he thought in sociological terms about such topics as democracy and the role of moral and intellectual elites. He also took an interest in a variety of psychological topics, including desire, pleasure and will, and the origins of conscience and justice.

The phenomena of mind and society are, in Mill’s view, causal processes. If mind and society are part of the causal order, and causation is regular succession, then the general model of explanation he has proposed, according to which explanation subsumes facts under laws linking them to their causal antecedents, will apply, he thinks, to the moral sciences. It may be hard for moral science to live up to it, in view of the complexity of its data, but the model stands as an

ideal. Important issues remain about the character of and relationships between the various moral sciences, and Mill treats these issues in detail. But he does not think that the very idea of a moral science raises new metaphysical or epistemological problems (see Explanation in history and social science §3).

Psychological concepts are intentional and, correspondingly, the moral sciences are interpretative. Can laws of individual behaviour be formulated, as Mill assumed, in this interpretative vocabulary? His analysis of the moral sciences takes their fundamental laws to lie in the domain of psychology. He was familiar with a different view, that of Auguste Comte, who held that the fundamental and irreducible moral science was sociology (a term coined by Comte). There was no deeper moral science, no science of psychology; the next level below sociology was the physical science of biology. Mill rejected that view, but enthusiastically shared Comte's vision of a historical sociology. Psychology may be the irreducible theoretical basis of the moral sciences; historical sociology is to be, as far as Mill was concerned, their prime exhibit.

Associationism and a Comtean historical sociology are thus the driving ideas in Mill's logic of the moral sciences. They interlock. Associationism fortifies his belief in the mutability of human nature: different social and historical formations can build radically different patterns of association. The bridge between historical sociology and the invariant laws of associationist psychology can be provided, Mill thinks, by an innovation of his own: a science he calls 'Ethology', which will study the different forms of human character in different social formations. He intended to write a treatise on the subject; significantly, he failed.

How, on this naturalistic view of mind and society, can human beings be free? The question mattered deeply to Mill. The conclusion others drew from the doctrine of determinism, namely, that we have (in Mill's phrase) no 'power of *self*-formation', and hence are not really responsible for our character or our actions, would have destroyed his moral vision. Self-formation is the fulcrum of his ideal of life, and 'moral freedom', the ability to bring one's desires under the control of a steady rational purpose, is a condition of self-formation, of having a character in the full sense (see Free will §§3–4).

Thus Mill had to show how causally conditioned natural objects can also be morally free agents. The sketch of a solution in the System of Logic (Book 6, chapter 2), which Mill thought the best chapter in the book, is brief but penetrating. (There is a longer discussion in An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy, chapter 26.) One of its leading features is a distinction between resistible and irresistible causes; 'in common use', only causes which are 'irresistible', whose operation is 'supposed too powerful to be counteracted at all', are called necessary:

There are physical sequences which we call necessary, as death for want of food or air; there are others which, though as much cases of causation as the former, are not said to be necessary, as death from poison, which an antidote, or the use of the stomach-pump, will sometimes avert...human actions are in this last predicament: they are never (except in some cases of mania) ruled by any one motive with such absolute sway, that there is no room for the influence of another.

(1843: 839)

An action caused by an irresistible motive (a ‘mania’) is plainly not free. This is certainly very pertinent. Yet something is added when we move from the idea of motives being resistible by other motives to the idea of moral freedom, the idea that I have the power to resist motives. It is the ability to recognize and respond to reasons. I act freely if I could have resisted the motive on which I in fact acted, had there been good reason to do so. A motive impairs my moral freedom if it cannot be defeated by a cogent reason for not acting on it. Mill fails to bring this connection between freedom and reason into clear view, but he relies on it in his ethical writings. He takes it that I am more or less free overall, according to the degree to which I can bring my motives under scrutiny and act on the result of that scrutiny. So I can *make* myself more free, by shaping desires or at least cultivating the strength of will to overcome them.

A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist...we must feel that our wish, if not strong enough to alter our character, is strong enough to conquer our character when the two are brought into conflict in any particular case of conduct. And hence it is said with truth, that none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free.

(1843: 841)

The identification of moral freedom with confirmed virtue, and (less explicitly) of confirmed virtue with steady responsiveness to reasons, is present in Mill as in Kant (see Kant, I. §11). But Mill does not address crucial questions such as what is it to grasp a reason, or how reason can be efficacious. To vindicate the coherence of his view one would have to show how to answer such questions in a way which is compatible with naturalism. The problem remains central in contemporary philosophy – certainly Mill himself never took full stock of it.

8. Happiness, desire and will

Mill’s single ultimate standard of theoretical reason is enumerative induction. His single ultimate standard of practical reason is the principle of utility; its standard is the good of all. But what is the good? According to Mill, it is happiness, understood as ‘pleasure, and freedom from pain’(1861a: 210) (see Happiness). His case rests on the following principle of method:

The sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so.

(1861a: 234)

Mill is not claiming that the conclusion that happiness is desirable follows deductively from the premise that people in general desire it. He gives some ground for that misinterpretation when he compares the move from ‘desired’ to ‘desirable’ to those from ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ to ‘visible’ and ‘audible’. Nevertheless, his procedure is simply an appeal to reflective practice, just as in the case of enumerative induction – where again the ‘sole evidence’ that enumerative induction is an ultimate norm of reasoning is that we acknowledge it as such ‘in theory and in practice’.

However, a question which is appropriate by Mill's own principle of method is whether reflective practice shows that happiness is the *only* thing we desire. Do not human beings, in theory and in practice, desire things other than happiness? Mill anticipates this question and responds to it at length. He claims that when we want a particular object for its own sake and with no further end in view (let us say, when we have an underived desire for it), then we desire it because we think of it as enjoyable: 'to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility' (1861a: 238). But this does not mean that we desire all objects as *means* to our pleasure. The desire for an object is genuinely a desire for that *object*; it is not the desire for pleasure as such. Mill's way of marking this is to say that the object is desired as a 'part' or an 'ingredient' of happiness, not as a means to it. His rejection of psychological egoism was one of the points on which he took himself to be at odds with Bentham (see Bentham, J. §3). When a person does something because they think it will be pleasant – for example a generous person who gives a present – it does not follow that they are acting selfishly (see Egoism and altruism). Generous people take pleasure in the prospect of giving, not in the prospect of getting pleasure; their desire to give is not derived from the desire to get pleasure. Giving is a part of their happiness, not a means to it.

Thus Mill's case for the claim that happiness is the sole human end, put more carefully, is this: 'Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until has become so' (1861a: 237). Nothing here assumed Hume's view that every action must ultimately flow from an underived desire. That is a quite separate issue, and Mill's view of it is closer to that of Kant or Reid than to that of Hume. He insists 'positively and emphatically'

that the will is a different thing from desire; that a person of confirmed virtue, or any other person whose purposes are fixed, carries out his purposes without any thought of the pleasure he has in contemplating them, or expects to derive from their fulfilment.

(1861a: 238)

This distinction between purpose and desire is central to Mill's conception of the will. When we develop purposes we can will against mere likings or aversions: 'In the case of an habitual purpose, instead of willing the thing because we desire it, we often desire it only because we will it' (1861a: 238). Every action is caused by a motive, but not every motive is a liking or aversion:

When the will is said to be determined by motives, a motive does not mean always, or solely, the anticipation of a pleasure or of a pain.... A habit of willing is commonly called a purpose; and among the causes of our volitions, and of the actions which flow from them, must be reckoned not only likings and aversions, but also purposes.

(1843: 842)

The formation of purposes from desires is the evolution of will; it is also the development of character. Mill quotes Novalis: 'a character is a completely fashioned will' (1843: 843). Not that this reflects the whole of his view of character; character for him requires the cultivation of feeling as well as the cultivation of will: 'A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are

the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character’ (1859: 264). Developed spontaneity of feeling is part of fully-perfected character, but certainly moral freedom is too – ‘none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free’. As noted in §7 above, Mill does not address the crucial question of what it is for a purpose to be informed by reason. Still, the distinction between purpose and desire does allow him to recognize conscientious action, action which flows not from any inclination but solely from a habit of willing; he asserts the possibility and value of a ‘confirmed will to do right’ (1861a: 238), distinct from motives of anticipated pleasure and pain. That ‘virtuous will’, however, is not for him an intrinsic good, as it is for Kant. It is

a means to good, not intrinsically a good; and does not contradict the doctrine that nothing is good to human beings but in so far as it is either itself pleasurable, or a means of attaining pleasure or averting pain.

(1861a: 239)

9. Qualities of pleasure

Happiness – pleasure and the absence of pain – is the sole final end of life. But Mill’s idea of it is altogether more romantic and liberal than that of earlier utilitarians. He takes into account the fact that a variety of notions – for example, purity, elevation, depth, refinement and sublimity, and their opposites – enter into our assessments of pleasure. We do not assess pleasures along a single dimension. In his general ethical and political writing, Mill freely draws on that extensive and flexible language. He sees the need to recognize it also in utilitarian theory, but here he does so rather more mechanically by distinguishing ‘quality’ and ‘quantity’ of pleasure. From the first publication of *Utilitarianism*, at least three sorts of question have been asked about this famous distinction. The first is whether it is reconcilable with hedonism. The second is epistemological: is there a cogent way of establishing that some pleasures are superior in ‘quality’? The third question, perhaps the most challenging, though less often discussed, is how the distinction fits into the framework of utilitarianism.

As to the first question: there is indeed, as Mill says, no reason in logic why more than one characteristic of pleasures should not be relevant to estimating their value – though if we call those characteristics ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’, we need to maintain a careful distinction between the quantity and quality of a pleasure on the one hand and its degree of value on the other. All that hedonism requires is that the only things that make a pleasure valuable are its characteristics as a *pleasure* (see Hedonism).

Nevertheless, an impression lingers that Mill’s discussion appeals to intuitions which are not hedonistic. For example:

Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast’s pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs.

(1861a: 211)

He also notes that a 'being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and is certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type' (1861a: 212). So a being of higher faculties may be faced with a choice: on the one hand a life of acute suffering, with no access to any of the higher pleasures which its faculties make it capable of appreciating, on the other, a cure (for example, an operation) which relieves its suffering but leaves it only with the pleasures available to a fool or a dunce. Is Mill saying that in *all* such cases the life of suffering should be preferred? He does not say so explicitly and if he does adhere to hedonism he should not. For cases are surely possible in which life after the cure offers a stream of pleasures more valuable overall, taking quality as well as quantity into account, than the life of suffering in which one retains one's higher faculties but is bereft of higher pleasures.

What of the epistemological question? Mill compares assessments of the comparative quality of pleasures to assessments of their comparative quantity: both are determined by 'the feelings and judgments of the experienced' (1861a: 213). But a judgment that the pleasure derived from film A is of a higher kind than that derived from watching film B is clearly, as Mill conceives it, an evaluative judgment. The proper comparison would have been with the evaluative judgment that pleasure as such is desirable. And Mill could have said that with this judgment, as with basic evaluative judgments in general, the only criterion is reflective practice – self-examination and discussion. In such discussion, some people emerge as better judges than others – this is not a circularity but an inherent feature of normative judgment.

Yet now the third question becomes pressing: how are such judgments of the quality of pleasures to be registered in the utilitarian calculus? In requiring utilitarianism to take them into account Mill makes a move of political as well as ethical significance. For what rank do we give to these pleasures in our social ordering – the rank which highly developed human natures attach to them or that which lower human natures attach to them? Mill's answer is unambiguous: it is the verdict of 'competent judges' which stands.

Suppose that beings of highly developed faculties place the pleasures of scientific discovery or artistic creation so much higher than those of material well-being that (above a certain modicum of physical comfort and security) any amount of the former, however small, is ranked by them above any amount of the latter, however large. Suppose, however, that beings of considerably less developed faculties would not share this assessment. And now suppose that the question is put to Mill, how much of the lower pleasure of the less developed being may be sacrificed to maintain the more highly developed being's higher pleasure? Mill's view is that the more highly developed being delivers the correct assessment of the relative value of the higher and lower pleasures. But, by hypothesis, it would be prepared to sacrifice any amount of the lower pleasure, down to a modicum of physical comfort and security, for the smallest amount of the higher. Must the same hold for the interpersonal case? Must it be correct for the utilitarian to sacrifice any amount of the lower pleasures of lower beings, down to a level at which they are provided with the modicum of comfort and security, in order to secure some higher pleasure for a higher being? Mill provides no answer.

10. The utility principle

Though Mill deepened the utilitarian understanding of pleasure, desire, character and will, he never adequately re-examined the principle of utility itself. When he states the utilitarian doctrine before considering what kind of proof can be given of it, he states it thus: 'Happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end, all other things being only desirable as means to that end' (1861a: 210). In effect, he takes his task to be that of demonstrating the truth of hedonism. All he has to say about the move from hedonism to the utility principle is that if 'each person's happiness is a good to that person' then 'the general happiness' must be 'a good to the aggregate of all persons'. In a letter in which he explains this unclear remark, he says: 'I merely meant in this particular sentence to argue that since A's happiness is a good, B's a good, C's a good, etc, the sum of all these goods must be a good' (1972: 1414). This contains two inexplicit assumptions. The more obvious point is that an egoist may accept that Mill has shown that 'each person's happiness is a good to that person', but deny that he has shown that happiness is a good tout court. The egoist denies that Mill has shown that *everyone* has reason to promote the happiness of anyone. That requires a separate postulate, as Henry Sidgwick pointed out.

The second inexplicit assumption is more subtle. At the end of the last chapter of Utilitarianism, 'On the Connexion between Justice and Utility', Mill does explain that he takes 'perfect impartiality between persons' to be part of the very meaning of the Greatest Happiness Principle:

That principle is a mere form of words without rational signification, unless one person's happiness, supposed equal in degree (with the proper allowance made for kind), is counted for exactly as much as another's. Those conditions being supplied, Bentham's dictum, 'everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one', might be written under the principle of utility as an explanatory commentary.

(1861a: 257)

So here Mill supplies the required postulate of impartiality. However, the concept of impartiality does not, on its own, yield utilitarianism's aggregative principle of distribution. Maximizing the *sum* of individuals' happiness, if it makes sense to talk in this way at all, is one way of being impartial: no individual's happiness is given greater weight than any other's in the procedure which determines the value of a state of affairs as a function of the happiness of individuals in that state of affairs. In this sense the procedure implements the principle, 'Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one'; but so does maximizing the average of all individuals' unweighted happiness. Here too all individuals count for one and no more than one. In fact a wide variety of non-equivalent distributive principles is impartial in this way. The most one could get from combining a postulate of impartiality with hedonism is that ethical value is a positive impartial function of individual happiness and of nothing else. In a footnote to the paragraph Mill glosses the requirement of perfect impartiality as follows: 'equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether felt by the same or by different persons'. That does yield aggregative or average utilitarianism, but it follows neither from the thesis that happiness is the only thing desirable to human beings, nor from the formal notion of impartiality (see Impartiality §2).

11. Morality and justice

When we turn to Mill's conception of the relationship between the utility principle and the fabric of principles which regulate everyday social life, we find him again at his most impressive. He stresses that a utilitarian standard of value cannot itself tell what practical rules, aims or ideals we should live by. In his autobiography he dates this conviction to the period of his mental crisis. He now 'gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual' (1873: 145–7). The prime task for human beings was to attend to that internal culture – to develop whatever was best in themselves. The indirect role in which he now cast the utility principle became a fundamental structural feature of his moral and political philosophy. For example, he accuses Auguste Comte of committing:

the error which is often, but falsely, charged against the whole class of utilitarian moralists; he required that the test of conduct should also be the exclusive motive of it.... M. Comte is a morality-intoxicated man. Every question with him is one of morality, and no motive but that of morality is permitted.

(1865b: 335–6)

Mill gives a succinct statement of his own doctrine at the end of the *System of Logic*. As always, he affirms 'that the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of Teleology'. But, he continues,

I do not mean to suggest that the promotion of happiness should be itself the end of all actions, or even of all rules of action. It is the justification, and ought to be the controller, of all ends, but is not itself the sole end.... I fully admit that...the cultivation of an ideal nobleness of will and conduct, should be to individual human beings an end, for which the specific pursuit either of their own happiness or of that of others (except so far as included in that idea) should, in any case of conflict, give way. But I hold that the very question, what constitutes this elevation of character, is itself to be decided by a reference to happiness as the standard.

(1843: 952)

The happiness of all is 'the test of all rules of conduct' – and not only rules of conduct but also of cultivation of feelings. How is the test applied? Here Mill learned more from Coleridge (§2) than from Bentham; that is, from historical criticism directed at the abstract social visionaries of the enlightenment. They did not see that moral sentiments can only grow in a stable tradition and social setting. They did not grasp the conditions necessary for such a tradition and setting – education of personal impulses to a restraining discipline, shared allegiance to some enduring and unquestioned values, 'a strong and active principle of cohesion' among 'members of the same community or state'. Hence

They threw away the shell without preserving the kernel; and attempting to new-model society without the binding forces which hold society together, met with such success as might have been anticipated.

(1840: 138)

This feeling for the historicity of social formations and genealogies of morals gives Mill's ethical vision a penetration which is absent from Bentham (and also from the excessively abstract discussions of utilitarianism in twentieth-century philosophy). On the other hand the analysis of morality, rights and justice which Mill fits into this ethical vision owes much to Bentham.

Mill examines the concept of justice in chapter 5 of *Utilitarianism*. Having observed that the idea of something which one may be constrained or compelled to do, on pain of penalty, is central to the idea of an obligation of justice, he notes that it nevertheless 'contains, as yet, nothing to distinguish that obligation from moral obligation in general':

The idea of penal sanction, which is the essence of law, enters not only into the conception of injustice, but into that of any kind of wrong. We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience.

(1865b: 246)

This is a normative, not a positive, account of morality: the morally wrong is that which *ought* to be punished, by law, social opinion or conscience. It would be a circular account if the 'ought' in question were itself a moral 'ought'. But the utility principle is the ultimate principle of 'Teleology'. Teleology is the 'Doctrine of Ends'; 'borrowing the language of the German metaphysicians', Mill also describes it as 'the principles of Practical Reason' (1843: 949–50). So the 'ought' is the 'ought' of Practical Reason – which, making appropriate use of 'laws of nature', produces the 'Art of Life'. Morality itself is only one department of this art. Moral concepts and judgments issue from the moral sentiments, the sentiments involved in guilt and blame; but are corrigible by a rational doctrine of ends. And that doctrine, in Mill's view, is the utility principle.

From this account of morality Mill moves to an account of rights and justice. A person has a moral right to a thing if there is a moral obligation on society to protect them in their possession of that thing. Obligations of justice are distinguished from moral obligations in general by the existence of corresponding rights:

Justice implies something which it is not only right to do, and wrong not to do, but which some individual person can claim from us as his moral right.... Whenever there is a right, the case is one of justice.

(1865b: 247)

Upholding rights is one of society's vital tasks. For on it depends our security – which is 'to every one's feelings the most vital of interests':

This most indispensable of all necessities, after physical nutriment, cannot be had, unless the machinery for providing it is kept unintermittedly in active play. Our notion, therefore, of the claim we have on our fellow-creatures to join in making safe for us the very groundwork of our existence, gathers feelings around it so much more intense than those concerned in any of the

more common cases of utility, that the difference in degree (as is often the case in psychology) becomes a real difference in kind.

(1865b: 251)

In this way the claim of justice comes to be felt as a claim of a higher kind than any claim of utility. Justice, Mill concludes,

is a name for certain classes of moral rules, which concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly, and are therefore of more absolute obligation, than any other rules for the guidance of life.

(1865b: 255)

Mill spells out in detail what these moral rules should be in his writings on various social questions. In Utilitarianism, he is concerned with the more abstract task of showing how justice-rights take priority over the direct pursuit of general utility by individuals or the state, just as they take priority over the private pursuit of personal ends. His position is thus more complex than that of philosophers in a Kantian tradition who assume, in John Rawls' phrase, that the right (or just) is prior to the good. For Mill, good is philosophically prior to right – but politically and socially right constrains the pursuit of good (see Justice §3).

12. Liberty and democracy

The most celebrated part of Mill's social philosophy, his essay *On Liberty*, must be read in terms of this conception of the right and the good. Mill is not a social contract or 'natural rights' liberal. He appeals instead to 'utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being' (1859: 224). He has in mind the higher human nature, capable of development by self-culture, which he believes to be present in every human being. Self-culture opens access to higher forms of human happiness, but it has to be *self*-culture, first because human potentialities are diverse and best known to each human being itself, and second because only when human beings work to their own plans of life do they develop moral freedom, itself indispensable to a higher human nature.

Given the importance free self-culture thus assumes in Mill's idea of human good, and the account of rights which has just been considered, it will follow that individual liberty must be a politically fundamental right. For self-development is one of 'the essentials of human well-being'. Thus Mill is led to the famous principle enunciated in *On Liberty*:

the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right.

(1859: 223–4)

A society which respects this principle enables individuals to realize their potential in their own way. It liberates a mature diversity of interest and feeling, and it nurtures the moral freedom of reason and will. Throwing open the gates to talent, creativity and dynamism, it produces the social conditions of moral and intellectual progress. This Millian argument remains the strongest defence of any liberalism founded on teleological ethics. It is a resource upon which teleological liberals will always be able to draw, whether or not they accept Mill's hedonistic conception of the human good or his aggregative conception of the good of all.

However, it is also connected with Mill's ambivalence about democracy. Like many other nineteenth-century thinkers, liberal as well as conservative, Mill felt a deep strain of anxiety about democratic institutions and the democratic spirit (see Democracy §2). Certainly he applauded the end of the *ancien régime* and sympathized with the moral ends of the French Revolution – liberty, equality, fraternity – but he learned from it, as had the continental liberals, to fear an enemy on the left, as well as an authoritarian enemy on the right. In its revolutionary form the enemy on the left threatened Jacobin terror, or the disasters which attend any attempt to achieve moral ideals by restarting history at year zero. Its settled form, on the other hand, could be observed in the 'democratic republic' of America: a continuous and unremitting pressure towards conforming mediocrity.

The Romantic-Hellenic ideal of human life both inspired Mill's democratic ideals and fuelled his fears about realized democracy. It was an ideal he shared with left Hegelians like Marx, who experienced less difficulty in combining it with democratic egalitarianism. Mill too had a long-term vision in which the emancipation and education of the working class could bring free self-culture to all human beings. He was able to believe, on the basis of his associationist psychology, that all human beings have an equal potential to develop their higher faculties. This warded off the possibility that utilitarianism might recommend an extremely inegalitarian pursuit of higher forms of well-being as the equilibrium state of a fully-developed human society.

Thus Mill remained more of a democrat than other liberals of the nineteenth century, such as de Tocqueville or Burckhardt, but like them he saw how moral and cultural excellence and freedom of spirit could be endangered by mass democracy. Like them, his attitude to the immediate prospect of democratic politics was decidedly mixed. What he wanted was a democratic society of freely developed human beings; he did not think it a proximate or certain prospect, and he thought that bad forms of democracy could themselves pose a threat to it by drifting into 'collective despotism' – a danger to which America had already succumbed.

His advice for warding off this threat was not less democracy but more liberty:

If the American form of democracy overtakes us first, the majority will no more relax their despotism than a single despot would. But our only chance is to come forward as Liberals, carrying out the Democratic idea, not as Conservatives, resisting it.

(1972: 672)

This was the importance of the essay on Liberty, and particularly of the defence of liberty of thought and discussion contained therein. Nor were freedom of speech and liberty of the

individual the only instruments by which Mill hoped to steer away from bad forms of democracy towards good. Some of his recommendations – plural voting, a public ballot, a franchise restricted by educational qualification – may now seem misguided or even quaint. Others, including proportional representation of minorities and, not least, his life-long advocacy of equal rights for women, make him seem ahead of his time. At any rate, in political philosophy from Plato's Republic to the present day, Mill's discussion of democracy has few rivals – for its open-mindedness, its historical and psychological awareness, and its underlying ethical power.

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