

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).

John Stewart's father, James Mill (1773-1836), was a "grim and exacting man." James Mill and [Jeremy Bentham](#) (1748-1832) were close friends, together they founded the [utilitarian school](#) in philosophy ("the greatest happiness of the greatest number"). James Mill accepted the theories of [Malthus](#) and was a friend of [Ricardo](#); he was an admirer of the French encyclopaedist Claude Helvetius (1715-71); he was a "doctrinaire believer in *laissez faire*."¹

John Stewart Mill's education came from his father, and his father's friends, particularly, Bentham.

When it came time to go to work, John joined his father as his assistant at the India House; Mill rose through the ranks to become the chief of office in 1856 and retired with a pension, when, in 1858, the East Indian Company dissolved.

John Stuart Mill's great writings were written in his spare time. They are on the 'NET. ♦ *On Liberty* (1859) is probably his most famous work. Among his other books are *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), *Utilitarianism* (1863), and his celebrated *Autobiography* (1873) ♦.

While he set out to follow the strict utilitarian line, John Stewart had a severe mental crisis (1826-27), after which he departed somewhat from "the utilitarianism of Bentham and his father by humanizing it and adding a note idealism." In time he developed utilitarianism into a more humanitarian doctrine. Mill became a strong advocate of women's rights and such political and social reforms as proportional representation, labor unions, and farm cooperatives. As an [empiricist](#) Mill was to subscribe to the notion that all knowledge comes to us through experience; and that there is no such thing as innate ideas, no such thing as moral precepts.

To gain an appreciation of Mill's philosophy it will be necessary to be acquainted with a school of philosophy known as positivism. The French philosopher, [Auguste Comte](#) (1798-1857), is considered to be its founder. No one will question the laudable goals of those who subscribe to positivism, including the "social scientists" of today; it is just that the premises on which these people proceed, are wrong. Human beings are individuals and a collection of them is but just that, a collection of individuals; and the collection will not take on a different life of its own: society is not an independent creature with a separate set of governing laws. It was on this basis that [Sir Karl Popper](#) formulated his criticisms. Popper thought that both Mill and Comte were wrong in treating collections of people as if these collections were physical or biological bodies, such that scientific methods might be employed to predict future events.

"That Mill should seriously discuss the question whether 'the phenomena of human society' revolve 'in an orbit' or whether they move, progressively, in 'a trajectory' is in keeping with this fundamental confusion between laws and trends, as well as with the holistic idea that society can 'move' as a whole - say, like a planet."²

Sir Karl, however, gave full credit to Mill and Comte as having made "great contributions to the philosophy and methodology of science." But, their doctrine that the course of

society might be predicted by "historical laws of succession is little better than a collection of misapplied metaphors."

Another thinker³ was of the view that John Stuart Mill treated "his assertions as if they have scientific authority, as if they have been demonstrated, when they have not been at all. ... Mill's fundamental principles have neither proof nor philosophical authority, but are commitments to action, the outcome of assertions to claim knowledge of the nature of the world and the direction men's duty ought to take within it: ... it is difficult to avoid feeling that much of what we will characterize as his arrogance is connected with want of clarity at this point."⁴

I should also say, that while Mill advanced the cause of democracy to a considerable degree -- in 1869, he eloquently argued for the right of women to vote -- he nonetheless believed, like [Plato](#), that "higher minds" should set the tone of society. ⁵

And, finally [Sir James Fitzjames Stephen](#) on Mill:

"He [Mill] thinks otherwise than I of men and of human life in general. He appears to believe that if men are all freed from restraints and put, as far as possible, on an equal footing, they will naturally treat each other as brothers, and work together harmoniously for their common good. I believe that many men are bad, a vast majority of men indifferent, and many good, and that the great mass of indifferent people sway this way or that according to circumstances."⁶

Quotes From John Stuart Mill:-

Bentham:-

- "Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge the two great seminal minds of England in their age." ("Bentham," 1838.)

Government Power:-

- "... 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 to forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because in the opinions of others to do so would be wise or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to someone else." (*On Liberty*, ch. 1.)

Liberty:-

- "Liberty consists in doing what one desires." (*On Liberty*, ch. 5.)
- "The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection." (*On Liberty*, introduction.)
- "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were 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." (*On Liberty*, ch. 2.)
- "The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people." (*On Liberty*, ch. 3.)

- "Whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called." (*On Liberty*, ch. 3)

Legislature:-

- "Instead of the function of governing, for which it is radically unfit, the proper office of a representative assembly is to watch and control the government." (*Dissertations and Discussions*, 1859.)

Taxes:-

- "Everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit." (*On Liberty*, ch. 4.)

Socialism:-

- The Argument of the Socialist as put by Mill:

"... There is no greater assumption of infallibility in forbidding the propagation of error, than in any other thing which is done by public authority on its own judgment and responsibility. Judgment is given to men that they may use it. Because it may be used erroneously, are men to be told that they ought not to use it at all? To prohibit what they think pernicious, is not claiming exemption from error, but fulfilling the duty incumbent on them, although fallible, of acting on their conscientious conviction. If we were never to act on our opinions, because those opinions may be wrong, we should leave all our interests uncared for, and all our duties unperformed. An objection which applies to all conduct can be no valid objection to any conduct in particular. It is the duty of governments, and of individuals, to form the truest opinions they can; to form them carefully, and never impose them upon others unless they are quite sure of being right. But when they are sure (such reasoners may say), it is not conscientiousness but cowardice to shrink from acting on their opinions, and allow doctrines which they honestly think dangerous to the welfare of mankind, either in this life or in another, to be scattered abroad without restraint, because other people, in less enlightened times, have persecuted opinions now believed to be true. Let us take care, it may be said, not to make the same mistake: but governments and nations have made mistakes in other things, which are not denied to be fit subjects for the exercise of authority: they have laid on bad taxes, made unjust wars. Ought we therefore to lay on no taxes, and, under whatever provocation, make no wars? Men, and governments, must act to the best of their ability. There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life. We may, and must, assume our opinion to be true for the guidance of our own conduct: and it is assuming no more when we forbid bad men to pervert society by the propagation of opinions which we regard as false and pernicious."

- The Argument of the Socialist as countered by Mill:

"I answer, that it is assuming very much more. There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right."

Eccentricity:-

- "That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time."

Custom:-

- "The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement." [And this is where Mill went wrong.]

Life:-

- "Human existence is girt round with mystery; the narrow region of our experiences is a small island in the midst of a boundless sea." (*Utility of Religion*, 1874.)

Free Speech:-

- "We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion; and if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still." (*On Liberty*, ch. 2.)

Right to be Let Alone:-

- "The individual is not accountable to society for his actions, insofar as these concern the interests of no person but himself." (*On Liberty*, ch. 5.)

Wise Words:-

- "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that." (*On Liberty*, ch. 2.)
 - "The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful is the cause of half their errors." (*On Liberty*, ch. 2.)
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