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Introduction

Once More unto the Breach

Upon hearing I was writing this book, a colleague inquired, “What is there left to say about John Stuart Mill?” The question, or challenge, struck me as apt, certainly for a book on Mill’s moral and political vision. Mill is widely considered to be “the most influential English language philosopher of the nineteenth century,”¹ and as having been a “quintessential public intellectual before the term was created.” The mountains upon towering mountains of commentary on his practical philosophy, especially on seminal works like *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*, can quickly induce altitude sickness in the scholar. As Mill biographer Richard Reeves has said, “If the true measure of greatness is posthumous productivity, as Goethe suggested, Mill’s status is assured.”² So, indeed: *another* book?

Well, the simple fact is that despite continuous efforts by numerous scholars to come to terms with Mill, there still exists a remarkable number of basic disagreements about how to interpret and weave together the various strands of his thought. At the most basic level, scholars like John Gray have distinguished between what he calls the *traditional* and the *revisionist* interpretations of Mill.³ While these schools are marked by their own internal disputes, the former tends to interpret Mill’s work as being shot through with intractable philosophical difficulties, whereas the latter tends to interpret his work as being misunderstood by the former and characterized by a deeper philosophical harmony, albeit one that raises problems and puzzles of its own. What I develop in this book is

1. Macleod, “John Stuart Mill.”

2. Reeves, “Mill’s Mind,” 3.

3. See Gray, “John Stuart Mill,” 7–35.

what we might call a *new* revisionist reading of Mill, one that embraces the attitude or outlook of the revisionist school while also integrating the enduring insights of the traditional school.

One of the intriguing things about Mill is that he was much more than a mere public intellectual, and yet not at all purely a moral or political philosopher. He philosophized largely in response to the “hot” issues of his time: “There were many such things, too: parliamentary reform, the US Civil War and slavery, the Irish potato famine, religious freedom, inherited power and wealth, and women’s rights, to name only the most obvious.”⁴ However, he also found in these issues, and in his private ruminations, an opportunity to explore, develop, and express independent, theoretical ideas. Indeed, more than anything else, Mill was what the Jesuits would call a contemplative in action, and his life was action-packed.

Mill’s rich biography is the stuff of academic legend and great literary drama. Those familiar with Mill will probably already know the beats to the story: a rigorous, experimental education under the tutelage of James Mill, his imperious father; raised to carry the torch for the Utilitarian reform project of his father and godfather, Jeremy Bentham, the leading light of England’s Philosophical Radicals; a nervous, near suicidal, breakdown at age twenty; recovery via Romantic poetry, which filled the sentimental and aesthetic void left in his soul by his exhausting, emotionally barren upbringing; meeting Harriet Taylor, the then-married love of his life, and carrying on a scandalous courtship with her; making deep and abiding friendships with many of his Conservative rivals; working at the East India Trading Company; his marriage to and intellectual partnership with Taylor; serving a storied spell in Parliament; and all the while pondering and scribbling away as he produced some of the most momentous and famous philosophical treatises of all time.

While there have been many wonderful biographies of Mill, my main interest lies in that last bullet point. Mill’s philosophical writings have inspired and provoked countless readers since their earliest publication. Essays like *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* triggered fierce storms of discussion and argument, storms that have still not abated. And many of Mill’s most notable works, like *Utilitarianism*, were written as much or more for wide consumption as for esoteric study. And yet, most all of Mill’s writings, from the breezy, loaded lines of *Utilitarianism* to the imposing rigor of *A System of Logic*, are composed with a distinctive acuity and intensity. As a whole, Mill’s corpus is one of world literature’s

4. Reeves, “Mill’s Mind,” 3.

greatest and most enduring displays of philosophical genius. However, Mill is as often noted for his inconsistency, illogic, and incoherence as he is for his unquestioned brilliance and profound influence. And that is what this book addresses.

A Surprisingly Difficult Writer

Harold Bloom, commenting on the panoramic richness of Shakespeare, once wrote, “You can bring absolutely anything to Shakespeare and the plays will light it up.” Bloom was cautioning would-be interpreters to take care before assigning any particular ideas or sentiments to the Bard, for his works capture all too much; and however carefully we read his plays, “his plays will read us more energetically still.”⁵

A similar word of warning has often been expressed in relation to Mill. Scholars have consistently noted the challenging, maze-like breadth and depth of Mill’s thought. As George Kateb remarks, *On Liberty* is “restless,” “almost unmanageably instructive,” and “when we think we have learned all its lessons, we may be mistaken.”⁶ Maria Morales believes that “labels are generally dangerous [with Mill] because counterexamples to one-sided interpretations can always be found in his corpus.”⁷ And as J. C. Rees declares, there “would be something profoundly unimaginative and unhistorical about any attempt to present [Mill’s] entire output as all of a piece.”⁸ Indeed, the nature of Mill’s work is almost paradoxical: he writes with unsurpassed clarity and frankness, and yet remains, in Alan Ryan’s words, a “surprisingly difficult writer.”⁹

In *On Liberty*, for instance, Mill claims to be advancing “one very simple principle,” that “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.” This principle—the Harm Principle—is based, Mill says, on utility “in the largest sense,” and he then ostensibly proceeds to demonstrate the social benefits resulting from our adherence to this principle.¹⁰ It sounds straightforward. And yet generations of scholarly attempts to come to grips with Mill’s “simple principle” have generated endless controversy and no shortage of opposing views since

5. Bloom, *Shakespeare*, xxii, 9.

6. Kateb, “Reading of *On Liberty*,” 28–29.

7. Morales, “Rational Freedom in John Stuart Mill’s Feminism,” 47.

8. Rees, *John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty*, 9.

9. Ryan, *Making of Modern Liberalism*, 257.

10. Mill, *On Liberty*, 223–224, *CW* 18.

the essay's publication—so much so that *On Liberty* “has ever since been hard to see for the smoke of battle.” Scholars appear to agree on one thing only: *On Liberty* “is a liberal manifesto”—but “*what* the liberalism is that it defends and *how* it defends it remain matters of controversy.”¹¹

While the controversies surrounding Mill are indeed too many and too difficult to squeeze into a single book, my intention is to step into the breach and make one more attempt at reconstructing the “spinal column” of Mill's practical philosophy: his theory of happiness, morality, liberty, and freedom. At the crux of this reconstruction is an old challenge: reading together what are, perhaps, the alpha and the omega of Mill's corpus—his 1861 essay *Utilitarianism* and its classic counterpart, his 1859 essay *On Liberty*. The former gives us the fullest and most renowned statement of Mill's value and moral theory, and the latter gives us the fullest and most renowned statement of Mill's social and political theory. One issue Mill is traditionally perceived to have is that *Utilitarianism* places absolute value on the general happiness, whereas *On Liberty* places absolute value on individual liberty: “What intellectual enterprise could be more misconceived, or more doomed to failure?”¹² As Alan Ryan declares, “Mill cannot wish both to espouse happiness as the only ultimate value and to defend liberty on absolute terms as well.”¹³ I argue that he can. And as C. L. Ten remarks, Mill must either subordinate liberty to utility, in which case liberty is violable whenever optimal; or subordinate utility to liberty, in which case utility is ancillary and, when push comes to shove, irrelevant.¹⁴ I argue that push does not (*cannot*) come to shove.

Nonetheless, given how stubborn the many troubles and enigmas posed by Mill's writings have been, it would behoove any interpreter to take very seriously the warning of scholars like Rees, and thus to make sure that they are not distorting anything or papering over any of the difficulties standing between the reader and a unified interpretation of Mill's practical philosophy. Mill's thought is like a hedge maze, and where you enter, and which ways you turn, raises certain problems and avoids others; and the problems you avoid will just be questions left unanswered unless your navigation really was pure and true at every intersection. To interpret Mill is to embark on a hazardous quest!

11. Ryan, *Making of Modern Liberalism*, 292.

12. Gray, *Mill on Liberty*, ix.

13. Ryan, *J. S. Mill*, 131.

14. See Ten, “Mill's Defence of Liberty,” 213–222.

A Unified Interpretation

Yet, despite my trepidation, my overarching contention is that the core components of Mill's practical philosophy present us with *one* seamless and comprehensive picture of happiness, morality, liberty, and freedom. For all his complexity and capaciousness, Mill maintains an essential unity of thought and vision.

Most scholars, when they attempt to unify Mill's practical thought, treat the steps in his philosophy—his value theory, his moral theory, his liberal theory—as if they were different cities that need to be connected by interpretive bridges: How does Mill's concept of individual happiness fit alongside his moral theory? How does Mill's liberal theory, especially as represented by the Harm Principle, square with his Utilitarianism?

However, what I argue is that each step in his thought is actually just a different layer of *the exact same city*. Mill's value theory describes a conception of happiness divided between the higher pleasures of individuality and sociality. Thus, the question becomes: what basic balance should (or *must*) the individual strike between individuality and sociality? The answer is provided by Mill's moral theory, which takes up *precisely* where his value theory leaves off. Mill argues that the hedonic *value*-sense theory by which we discern these twin spheres of happiness is, when converted into a hedonic *moral*-sense theory, also the means by which we discern the extent to which sociality cannot be but *obligatory* to anyone likewise responsive to the realm of desirability. But, then, the question becomes: when, if ever, would justice allow society at large to interfere with individual liberty? Mill's liberal theory replies: in order to enforce an ideal balance between individuality and sociality—indeed, the very same basic degree of sociality that is morally obligatory. And when we get to chapter 4 and Mill's principle of freedom as non-domination, we will see that freedom, properly understood, not only protects our liberty but also fortifies and enhances the ideal balance between individuality and sociality that we, as individuals, need to be happy, moral, and free.

Indeed, according to Mill, as long as society remains completely free, the well-developed person gains everything and loses nothing, at least nothing of intrinsic or ultimate worth. Mill is pluralistic in his value monism, but he *is* a value monist: he believes that all valuable things hang together. The deepest insight, for Mill, is that a happy life is a moral life; that a moral life is a liberal life; and that a liberal life is a life of total freedom.

My interpretation of Mill is based on a close reading of his most salient texts, particularly *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*, buttressed by regular

appeals to his broader, quite bountiful corpus. While Mill's personal life and character, along with his historical situation and motivations, are important to understanding him fully, my reading is tightly focused on the writings Mill left behind. Needless to say, I make references to his personal or historical context, and certainly to his intellectual milieu, whenever helpful or necessary. But I want to see how far we can get, or where we end up, by considering what his words have to tell us—directly, now, in our own time and place—about some of the deepest, eternal questions: What is happiness? What is morality? What is justice? What is freedom?

In trying to make sense of Mill, I have been reminded constantly of a warning from George Kateb, which I encountered in the first paragraph of the first Mill commentary I ever cracked open. Referring to *On Liberty*, Kateb observes, “There is no reason to think that any account of the book will ever satisfy all who take the book seriously. Indeed, any single reader is likely to grow dissatisfied after a while with his or her own interpretation.”¹⁵ Kateb's reflection, applied to Mill as a whole, proved all too prophetic: God only knows how many crumpled outlines I rimmed off my recycling bin. Moreover, I am neither barmy nor smug enough to imagine that this will be the Mill book to end all Mill books. Indeed, Mill is highly resistant to any decisive, definitive treatment: “His goal to unite the philosophies represented in his own age by Bentham and Coleridge plays out throughout his philosophy as no less than an attempt to reconcile Enlightenment and Romanticism, liberalism and conservatism, scientific explanation and humanistic understanding.”¹⁶ I do not believe even Mill *himself*, were he alive today, would be able to devise a self-interpretation that would convince or appease *all* his readers.

Nonetheless, the final outline (spared a perilous flight across my office) was, to my mind, convincing and appeasing in ways that I thought worth sharing at length. What I have laid out in this book is, I think, a unified interpretation of Mill that not only feels truly fluid and organic, but also shows itself to be self-reinforcing. In the ensuing chapters, Mill's doctrines of happiness, morality, liberty, and freedom are not merely *reconciled*; rather, they actually *emanate* from one another, whether working forward or backward. Mill's liberal theory flows from his moral theory, which flows from his value theory; and Mill's value theory is implicit in his moral theory, which is implicit in his liberal theory. Properly understood, you can begin with *any* of Mill's doctrines and deduce the others.

15. Kateb, “Reading of *On Liberty*,” 28.

16. Macleod and Miller, “Preface,” xvii.

One thing I have assiduously tried to avoid is the temptation to bracket or highlight specific passages as being *the* definitive statement of this or that Millian theory. This temptation rears its head time and again in the literature. For instance, there are plenty of scholars who would like to reduce Mill's conception of happiness to what we discover in the second chapter of *Utilitarianism* or the third chapter of *On Liberty*.¹⁷ Similarly, there is a tendency in the revisionist literature to reduce Mill's moral standard to a single passage from the fifth chapter of *Utilitarianism*: "Mill's conception of moral requirement is simple; he states it in a couple of sentences."¹⁸ To put it mildly: *no*, he does *not*. On the contrary, his moral standard, while ultimately rather simple, takes no small degree of jigsaw-puzzle labor to piece together.

To wit, the true challenge in interpreting Mill is that *there is no* section, line, or passage where Mill expresses himself so definitively, so thoroughly, that *all other* sections, lines, or passages must be filtered and evaluated accordingly. This is not to say that certain sections, lines, or passages do not pronounce or evoke certain fundamental Millian ideas or principles; rather, this is just to say that there is no section, line, or passage that establishes an Archimedean point of interpretation. To interpret Mill effectively is to tell a story in which every section, line, and passage has its proper role and place, but in which *no* section, line, or passage takes on an outsized, domineering importance. A jigsaw puzzle indeed.

Why Mill?

None of this, though, illuminates why we ought to surrender our attention, here and now, to yet another book on Mill. Well, justifying Mill himself is easy enough: Mill has a richly deserved place in the philosophical pantheon; he is a brilliant, ageless, elevating thinker. When asked why he intended to scale Mount Everest, George Mallory replied, "Because it's there." A similar spirit ought to prevail in our study of the greatest minds that have ever lent themselves to the deepest human inquiries: What is valuable, and what is the nature of happiness? What is obligatory, and what is the nature of morality? What is freedom, and what is the nature of a just and good society? These are questions that should engage our interest whenever and wherever we find ourselves. Stranded on a deserted

17. Typically, the latter appeal is made in passing.

18. Brown, "Harm Principle," 420.

island, any contemplative castaway would be lucky to have Mill's collected works close at hand.

Moreover, the philosophy of Mill is remarkably well suited to our contemporary environment. We find ourselves in a secular, disenchanted age, when values and morals are struggling to establish themselves as something more than merely subjective. We find ourselves in an ever more interconnected mass society, where the relationship between the solitary individual and the powers that be, both social and political, is becoming an ever more pressing and challenging concern. We find ourselves in a social and political landscape where it is becoming ever less apparent what social or political values, if any, could or should unite us, and how we ought to understand any such values. Needless to say, Mill felt and saw *all* these developments in England and abroad, living through the mid-nineteenth century, a period of rapid and unprecedented transition. And while Mill's work is timeless, I think any sensible, sensitive reader will also find his philosophy to be strikingly timely.

However, the justification for *this* volume is threefold. First, for reasons that will become apparent throughout the following chapters, I found myself deeply engaged and enriched but ultimately dissatisfied with the extant scholarship on Mill. Standing on the shoulders of countless others, I thought I could see an even further horizon and took it upon myself to journey toward it. Personally, I also wanted to compose a book on Mill that preserves and even accentuates what makes his work so musical and vigorous. In this pursuit, I have doubtless traded some precision for style, but hopefully not at the expense of any substance.

In addition to this exegetical rationale, I wrote this book as a sympathetic account of Mill's uncommon common sense. Indeed, Mill is an empirical thinker who stretches the evidence of everyday life to dazzling and bracing philosophical heights; *anyone* can read Mill and be transported philosophically based on nothing more than their own experiences and observations. While valuable for plenty of other reasons, what was missing, I felt, from many other works on Mill was a *strong* or *thick* sense that Mill might actually be *right*; that we, too, should be Utilitarians and liberals of his persuasion. Mill is even alleged by many of his admirers to have regrettably weak theoretical foundations: the competent judge, the infamous "proof," the principle of liberty. However, when suitably represented, I think Mill makes a cogent, potent argument for his distinctive vision.

And finally, with liberalism reeling if not fading throughout the world, I believe it is a perfect moment to consider Mill afresh. For one thing,

Mill is a thinker for whom the term “liberal” is as much an adjective as a noun. Liberalism as a *noun*, or as a *thing*, refers to a set of principles and practices, typically having to do with things like individual rights and liberties, sociopolitical equality, and limited government. But liberal as an *adjective*—that is, the *modifying* liberal, in the sense of being *liberal-minded*, or having a *liberal* outlook, spirit, or method—refers to a more general capaciousness, humility, and generosity. Mill’s philosophical approach is as much or more about *being* liberal in mind, heart, and soul as it is about liberalism itself. Thus, to return to Mill anew is to plant and nurture precious seeds that might grow and flourish despite the storms and surges of the wider world.

Indeed, good, healthy societies have guiding philosophies, not brittle ideologies; and if something is going to replace liberalism, it can still be a *liberal* version of whatever it turns out to be. To be sure, Mill defends certain institutions and policies as being best or ideally representative of liberty and freedom; but this does not mean that liberty and freedom must be totally forgone in their absence, or that nonliberal regimes cannot embrace liberty and freedom to a greater or lesser extent. In short, just as a robust liberalism should be mindful of and inflected by Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, whatever emerges next could be mindful of and inflected by Mill, which makes understanding Mill at his best of pressing importance—not least of all for possibly stemming any illiberal tides.

Mill’s Value Theory

In chapter 1, I discuss Mill’s value theory. What is intrinsically valuable or desirable? And what does Mill mean by happiness, or the good life? First, I assess Mill’s so-called doctrine of the higher pleasures and argue that Mill successfully combines the hedonistic and qualitative aspects of his doctrine into a *supra*-hedonistic position that I call *high-minded hedonism*. This involves rejecting the most notable readings of Mill as a qualitative hedonist and proposing a new way of synthesizing his hedonistic and non-hedonistic claims. Second, I reconstruct Mill’s empirical defense of the higher pleasures and develop what I call his hedonic value-sense theory. In so doing, I represent Mill’s critique of psychological hedonism along the very lines defended by some of his most trenchant critics. Third, I highlight Mill’s division between the higher pleasures of *individuality* and *sociality*. In a proof-by-demonstration of his aforesaid critique, I reveal how Mill rejects not only psychological hedonism, but also its progenitor, psychological egoism. And finally, I show how Mill’s empirical

approach to the higher pleasures pushes him beyond a merely aggregative conception of happiness to one that is more Aristotelian: *the activity of the higher faculties in accordance with the higher pleasures.*

Mill's Moral Theory

In chapter 2, I discuss Mill's moral theory. What are we obliged to do or refrain from doing? And what moral meaning and weight should we accord to things like utility, rules, and justice? First, I show how the entirety of *Utilitarianism* is devoted to "proving" one proposition: that the general happiness (or Utility) is the only morally relevant value. This involves separating Mill's moral standard, the Utility Principle, from the Benthamite directive to maximize the general happiness; and this also involves expanding Mill's "proof" of the Utility Principle beyond the unfairly maligned opening passage to the fourth chapter of *Utilitarianism*. Second, to bolster these other reflections, I disinter Mill's empirical defense of the Utility Principle and develop what I call his hedonic moral-sense theory. In so doing, I repurpose the evidence given for what is often called Mill's Sanction Utilitarianism. Third, I dissociate Mill's Utilitarianism from the most famous brand of Utilitarian ethics and the school in which Mill was raised; namely, Benthamism. Drawing on his hedonic moral-sense theory, I argue that Mill has a much less "totalizing" vision of morality than Bentham. Fourth, by reconstructing his theory of *morality as impartiality*, I explain how Mill actually intends for us to interpret the demands of the Utility Principle. This will prompt me to introduce a figure lurking in the background of his moral theory: the *impartial observer*. Fifth, I compare Mill to the classic debate between Act and Rule Utilitarianism. While affirming that Mill makes moral judgments entirely on the basis of moral rules, I argue that the Act versus Rule dichotomy is, for Mill, incoherent and needless. And finally, I address Mill's concept of justice, which focuses on the natural emergence of perfect duties. This will provide an opportunity to interrogate the relative inattention Mill pays to *imperfect* duties.

Mill's Liberal Theory

In chapter 3, I discuss Mill's liberal theory. What principle ought to govern the relationship between the individual and society? When is it permissible for society to interfere with the individual? First, I motivate the discussion by explicating the general value Mill places on what is known as *liberty as non-interference*. I argue that Mill both echoes and exceeds the

core Benthamite reasons for valuing liberty. Second, I address the meaning of the so-called Harm Principle. My core contention is that to “harm,” for Mill, is to act “unjustly,” which merges Mill’s liberal theory with his moral theory. However, I maintain that the *other* main stream of scholarship, which assigns to Mill a more common or colloquial concept of harm, is *also* essential. As I contend, Mill uses an *ordinary* concept of harm in order to underscore the inviolability of what I label *inward liberty*. Third, I reconstruct Mill’s absolutist defense of intellectual liberty. In short, I show how the second chapter of *On Liberty* is, at core, a painstaking, step-by-step Utilitarian defense of freedom of thought, speech, and discussion. Fourth, I do the same for Mill’s absolutist defense of ethical liberty. This will involve paying special attention to Mill’s conception of *individual originality*, and how it deepens and refines his theory of happiness. And finally, I press Mill on the issues of liberal civility and anti-paternalism, and consider how his liberalism at once succeeds and fails in handling the challenge of uncivil or immature citizens.

Mill’s Republican Theory

In chapter 4, I discuss Mill’s republican theory. What principle ought to direct or frame the relationship between individuals and the sociopolitical institutions that govern them? What should be the individual’s relationship to social or legal power? First, I distinguish between what I call the *libertarian* and *republican* concepts of freedom: the former is *liberty as non-interference*, whereas the latter is *freedom as non-domination*. In so doing, I give a theoretical account as to why Mill, based on his empirical teleology, would naturally reject the libertarian view of freedom and endorse the republican theory. Second, I provide a republican reading of Mill’s concept of freedom. While other scholars have looked to *The Subjection of Women* to make this argument, I look to *On Liberty* instead and show how that famously libertarian text is actually republican to its core. Third, I taxonomize Mill’s various reasons for *valuing* freedom as non-domination over and above, and, indeed, often at the expense of, mere liberty as non-interference. Several scholars have remarked that Mill sees in domination the tendency to keep the dominated in the immaturity of their faculties; but, in fact, he has a litany of principled reasons for opposing domination. And finally, I touch upon the significance Mill places on civic participation. As we will see, civic participation is necessary not only to secure non-domination, but also to ensure and enhance individual and social flourishing.

Mill and His Critics

In chapter 5, having worked my way through Mill's practical philosophy, I consider a few general lines of criticism—not a comprehensive review of any and all relevant critiques, but a meditation on several pointed concerns one might have with Mill's oeuvre. The questions are as follows: First, is Mill *too libertarian*? Here we encounter *the* classic conservative critique of Mill. Second, is Mill *too progressive*? Here we encounter the *other* notable conservative critique of Mill, one stemming from the revisionist tradition. Third, is Mill *too conservative*? Here we encounter what might be the most resonant progressive critique of Mill. And finally, is Mill *too communitarian*? Here we encounter the question of moral motivation and ask whether or not Mill can account for the *whole* of morality. In short, I argue that Mill's practical philosophy, while certainly not immune from error or criticism, can withstand these inquiries.

Footnotes

All my footnotes to Mill correspond to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. They reference the title of the work, the page number(s), and the volume of the collection. For instance, “Mill, *On Liberty*, 217, *CW* 18” means page 217 of volume 18. Similarly, all my footnotes to Bentham (with some exceptions) correspond to *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* and follow the same structure. For example, “Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 14, *W* 1.” For the sake of keeping the footnotes clean, I include the volume reference only the first time a work is cited in each chapter. Both collections are available at the *Online Library of Liberty*: <https://oll.libertyfund.org>.

Also, all emphases in quotations are from the original source unless otherwise noted in the corresponding footnote.

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