

Review Essays

New Perspectives on John Stuart Mill

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Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller, *A Companion to Mill* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), xx + 604, \$195.00 cloth, \$156.99 e-book.

“*W*hy another companion volume, given the existence of the excellent 1998 *Cambridge Companion to Mill*, edited by John Skorupski?” That is a reasonable question to ask, and in fact the editors begin their preface by asking it. In answering, they rightly focus on the large amount of high-quality Mill scholarship that has been published in the intervening years. But there is also another reason. Whereas Skorupski’s book consists of 14 chapters of, on average, 36 pages each, Macleod and Miller have collected 37 chapters of, on average, 16 pages. They can therefore present more focused investigations of many facets of Mill’s broad-ranging oeuvre, including topics on which he wrote relatively little, such as aesthetics, history, virtue, and the philosophy of language.

It probably says more about Mill than about the editors that in spite of this broad coverage, important aspects of his work are still missing. For instance, his views on race and gender are compacted into a single chapter, in spite of the central role that both these themes have in his

social and political thought. His criticism of Carlyle's racist defense of slavery is mentioned, but his extensive other writings against racism and in support of the Union in the American Civil War are not discussed. How close this topic was to Mill's heart can be seen from his statement that in America, "perfect civil equality between one person and another" had to be first achieved "between white people and black; after which it will still remain to bring it into operation between men and women" (CW 16:1119, cf. CW 16:1106).¹ Otherwise, he repeatedly described equal civil rights for women as "of all practical subjects the most important" (CW 14:49; cf. CW 17:1830, 1838).

Only one of the chapters is devoted to his economics, namely Gerald Gaus's valuable "Mill's Normative Economics." It covers a lot of ground, including Mill's views on laissez faire and socialism, but of course most aspects of Mill's economics are left out. It should not be forgotten that Mill was one of the most influential economists of the nineteenth century. The omission of such a prominent part of his scholarship may perhaps have something to do with the inclusion of this book in a series of "Companions to Philosophy." It also conforms to the general trend that Mill's economics is mostly left out in philosophically oriented studies of his work, and instead discussed in a separate tradition among historians of economics.

This separation between Mill-the-philosopher and Mill-the-economist has left important connections between his economics and other parts of his scholarship unexplored. Christopher Macleod's chapter "Mill on history" provides an example of this. Macleod brings up many of the ways in which Mill was concerned with history, but he does not discuss Mill's use of historical evidence in his *Principles of Political Economy*. This is a topic that has often been discussed by historians of economic methodology, but then without the references to Mill's writings on philosophy and general history that Macleod makes use of. Anyhow, Macleod's chapter is highly valuable, not least due to its unusually clear distinctions between different forms of historicism.

Writing on dead philosophers

There are many ways to write the history of philosophy. (Rorty 1984) Leaving out the fine details, we have a choice between the two horns of Alasdair MacIntyre's dilemma:

Either we read the philosophies of the past so as to make them relevant to our contemporary problems and enterprises, transmuting them as far as possible into what they would have been if they were part of present-day philosophy, and minimizing or ignoring or even on occasion misrepresenting that which refuses such transmutation because it is inextricably bound up with that in the past which makes it radically different from present-day philosophy; *or* instead we take great care to read them in their own terms, carefully preserving their idiosyncratic and specific character, so that they cannot emerge into the present except as a set of museum pieces. (MacIntyre 31)

The first-mentioned method, which we may call the ahistorical approach, has been the choice of many philosophers writing on the history of their own discipline. This approach was passionately defended by Karl Jaspers (1962, xi, xiv). The second method, which we may call the historical approach, has been defended for instance by R.G. Collingwood (22) and by John Dewey, who wrote that we should study the history of philosophy "not as an isolated thing but as a chapter in the development of civilization and culture" (25). I believe the latter approach, though admittedly more laborious, is the more fruitful one. If we wish to investigate what bearing some philosophical writings from a previous age may have on problems that concern us today, then the first step must always be to understand the thoughts expressed in those writings. That usually requires careful studies of their philosophical and social context. Only after that work has been done can we meaningfully discuss possible ways to apply the same way of thinking to the problems that concern us now.

Deceptive modernity

Nineteenth-century political writings are often deceptively “modern.” They center around terms like “socialism,” “communism,” “dictatorship,” “democracy,” and “liberalism,” which we also use today. One may therefore get the impression that there is no need to contextualize in order to understand, but that is largely an illusory impression. The nineteenth century notion of “socialism” was much more vague and more inclusive than ours. “Communism” had not yet acquired the meaning that the Bolsheviks assigned to it. “Dictatorship” still usually referred to a temporary delegation of extraordinary power to a chief magistrate, and it did not have the strong negative connotations that “despotism” and “tyranny” had (and still have). “Democracy” was much less well defined than today. It was also viewed much less favorably, and for most of the century, the majority of liberals did not approve of it.

For modern readers of nineteenth-century texts, there is always a risk of transferring them in a misleading way to present-day discussions. Perhaps this risk is particularly great when we read John Stuart Mill. His argumentation and ways of reasoning often give a more “modern” impression than the writings of most of his contemporaries. But of course, he was deeply involved in the same discussions as they. Therefore, his social and political philosophy has to be understood in relation to events and debates in his own times.

The *Companion to Mill* is based on solid scholarship, and many of its chapters contribute considerably to our understanding of the contemporary background of Mill’s thinking. But just as in the Mill literature, in general there are in the Companion’s chapters examples of how the terminologies and discussions of our own time may have a problematic influence on how we read Mill today.

Liberalism

Mill was clearly a liberal in the present sense of the word. But in his own times, that designation was less self-evident. He called himself a

"radical" and an "advanced liberal," but he carefully avoided to use the term "liberal" about himself without the modifier "advanced" (Hansson 2013). His criticism of mainstream liberalism was often harsh; for instance he wrote in 1839 that "if the time is come when a radical review should support the Whigs, the time is come when I should withdraw from politics" (CW 13:397). He beseeched his fellow radicals not to sink into "a mere *côté gauche* of the Whig party" (CW 1:205). Instead, he promoted the creation of a new party, which he called "a radical party" (CW 13:397; CW 16:1493) or "a really advanced liberal party" (CW 16:1197). He saw his candidacy for parliament in 1865 as a candidacy for "the advanced liberal & reforming party" (CW 16:1006, cf. CW 1:276).

The major factor that alienated Mill from the Whig party seems to have been their opposition to a radical extension of suffrage (CW 13:410). He was, at least in this respect, more of a liberal in the modern sense than the liberals of his own time whom he criticized. However, in a scholarly discussion it is important to distinguish between the nineteenth- and twenty-first-century usages of the term "liberal." In a couple of the chapters in the *Companion to Mill*, this could have been done more clearly.

In his introductory chapter, Richard V. Reeves says: "A liberal society, for Mill, was one in which each person was free to progress 'nearer to the best thing they can be'" (7). The quotation is from *On Liberty* (CW 18:267), but there Mill does not mention a "liberal society." In his chapter on the harm principle, D.G. Brown says that Mill, when reflecting late in life on his own work, realized that chapters II and III of *On Liberty* "embodied the spirit of what liberalism was all about" (410). Presumably, this refers to the passage in the *Autobiography* where Mill says that *On Liberty* was "likely to survive longer than anything else that I have written (with the possible exception of the *Logic*)" (CW 1:259). However, Mill says nothing about liberalism in that passage.

In his chapter on Mill and freedom of speech, Daniel Jacobson emphatically claims that Mill was a proponent of "classical liberalism,"

contrary to “some modern reinterpretations of him as a proto-progressive” (441). It is far from well defined what distinguishes “classical” liberalism from other forms of liberalism. Typically, the liberals classified as “new” or “modern” have put less emphasis on laissez faire and been more eager to promote universal suffrage and various welfare reforms than those classified as “classical.” Jacobson attempts to draw the line by identifying the classical liberals as those who “support an unqualified defense of speech rights” (441). That is an obvious non-starter, since defense of the freedom of expression is a characteristic uniting rather than dividing different kinds of liberals. (A much more nuanced analysis of how Mill’s views relate to both classical and modern liberalism can be found in Piers Norris Turner’s chapter, “Mill and modern liberalism.”)

A Misappropriation of Mill

Jacobson differs from all the other authors in this volume by trying to use Mill for present-day purposes that have no obvious connection with Mill’s own political strivings and ideals. For instance, he worries about “rules that make exceptions for putatively low-value speech as progressives are wont to do with ‘hate speech’ and scepticism about climate change, both of which have been recently targeted for censorship by prestigious transnational institutions (such as the European Union and the United Nations)” (442). Concerning hate speech, Mill made it clear in *On Liberty* that expressions of opinion “lose their immunity, when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act” (CW 18:260). To exemplify this, he mentioned statements to the effect that corn-dealers starve the poor, or that private property is robbery, when uttered in front of an excited mob outside a corn-dealer’s house. We have every reason to believe that he would have reacted similarly if the “positive instigation to some mischievous act” were an incitement to racist atrocities. In the aftermath of the civil war he advocated harsh measures by the federal government to insure “equal civil rights,” including suffrage, for the

former slaves in the Confederate states. This would amount to "nothing less than electing to rule tyrannically over the whole Southern population, in order to avoid depriving the white half of that population of the power of tyrannizing over the black half" (CW 16:1099; cf. CW 16:1066).

Jacobson does not substantiate his claim that climate science denial – which he calls "scepticism about climate change" – has been subject to censorship by the European Union and the United Nations. He probably refers to the fact that both these organizations have issued publications summarizing the scientific consensus on climate change, in which the claims of science denialists have not been included. However, the exclusion of erroneous claims from scientific publications is not called censorship. It is called peer review. But of course, this has nothing to do with John Stuart Mill. Incontrovertible evidence of global climate change emerged only about 120 years after his death.

Equal opportunities

But let us turn to a much more subtle and interesting distinction between nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of a term in political philosophy, namely that of equal opportunity. In his chapter "Mill on justice and rights," David Brink says: "The kind of equality Mill treats as a matter of right and justice is *equality of opportunity*" (380, cf. 388). Mill was certainly a champion of equal opportunities. For instance, he supported "a complete unsectarian education to the entire people, including primary schools, middle schools, high schools, and universities, each grade to be open free of cost to the pupils who had most distinguished themselves in the grade below it" (CW 6:531). Another example is his lifelong fight to open up opportunities in life that were then legally closed for women.

But Brink says something more. In the sentence quoted above he claims that equality of opportunity is *the* kind of equality that Mill treats as a matter of right and justice, thus excluding other types of equality. This is a claim that makes sense in the modern debate that contrasts equality of opportunity against equality of resources (or outcomes)

(Fleurbacay 1995, Mitra 2015). In these terms, Brink can be interpreted as implying that as a matter of right and justice, Mill promoted equality of opportunity but not equality of resources. However, that does not seem to have been Mill's own perspective on equality of opportunity. This can be seen from a rare case in which he actually used the phrase. The first sentences of the following passage from the *Principles of Political Economy* is quoted by Brink, but the second sentence is also needed to see what Mill was aiming at:

Many, indeed, fail with greater efforts than those with which others succeed, not from difference of merits, but difference of opportunities; but if all were done which it would be in the power of a good government to do, by instruction and by legislation, to diminish this inequality of opportunities, the differences of fortune arising from people's own earnings could not justly give umbrage. With respect to the large fortunes acquired by gift or inheritance, the power of bequeathing is one of those privileges of property which are fit subjects for regulation on grounds of general expediency; and I have already suggested, as a possible mode of restraining the accumulation of large fortunes in the hands of those who have not earned them by exertion, a limitation of the amount which any one person should be permitted to acquire by gift, bequest, or inheritance. (CW 3:811)

The proposal he referred to here would make it impossible for anyone to acquire by bequest or inheritance anything above "a certain maximum, which should be fixed sufficiently high to afford the means of comfortable independence" (CW 2:225). Already in Mill's time, this would lead to a radical redistribution of wealth (but not as radical as if it were applied today). Importantly, he promoted it as a means to achieve equality of opportunity. There is a logic to that position; wealth certainly comes with opportunities. However, a discussion of the role of equality of opportunity in his political thinking will have to take into account that

his own interpretation of that concept does not coincide with how it is usually understood today.

And apart from the terminology, Mill said in no uncertain terms that suffering cannot be justified by the fact that those who suffer do so because they failed in a competition for better conditions:

If some Nero or Domitian were to require a hundred persons to run a race for their lives, on condition that the fifty or twenty who came in hindmost should be put to death, it would not be any diminution of the injustice that the strongest or nimblest would, except through some untoward accident, be certain to escape. The misery and the crime would be that any were put to death at all. So in the economy of society; if there be any who suffer physical privation or moral degradation, whose bodily necessities are either not satisfied or satisfied in a manner which only brutish creatures can be content with, this, though not necessarily the crime of society, is *pro tanto* a failure of the social arrangements. And to assert as a mitigation of the evil that those who thus suffer are the weaker members of the community, morally or physically, is to add insult to misfortune. Is weakness a justification of suffering? (CW 5:713)

Truly impressive

These critical remarks should be read as marginal notes to a truly impressive collection of contributions to Mill scholarship. The *Companion to Mill* bears sure signs of unusually intense and efficient editing efforts. The chapters are of uniform length and style, the overall coverage is impressive, the overlaps are few, unsubstantiated claims are rare, and the general quality is excellent. The editors should be congratulated for a remarkable achievement.

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Note

¹ CW refers to *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-1991.

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