

Interpreting John Stuart Mill

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1. Introduction

On the face of it, John Stuart Mill's texts seem to be easy for a modern reader to understand. The English language has not changed dramatically in the one-and-a-half to two centuries since he wrote. Few of the words he used could not be used in educated English today. He wrote on topics that are still discussed, and his style is characterized by a consistent effort to make himself as clearly understood as possible. So could there be any problems in understanding him?

In fact, there can. Although the central terms in his texts are still in frequent use, some of these words have undergone substantial changes in meaning and connotation. He often referred to material and social conditions and not least to prevailing ideas and debates that have changed dramatically since then. When discussing future social arrangements—which he did often—he sometimes deliberated what was feasible in the next few years, sometimes what would be possible in a distant future, after other social improvements had first been achieved. Furthermore, he was a master in the art of rhetoric, using his matter-of-fact style of writing in carefully premeditated ways.

In addition to all this, we who read him tend to see him in either of two perspectives: either we try to fit him into today's debates, usually in ethics or politics, or we see him as one in a series of great Western philosophers involved in a timeless discussion, treating Locke, Hume, and Russell as his interlocutors rather than nineteenth-century academics, publicists, and politicians. (For criticism of these types of interpretation, see Hansson 2019, 190-91; and respectively Winch 2004, 553). But of course, Mill wrote for his own contemporaries, and primarily for a

British audience. This can be seen for instance in his correspondence in the months following the publication of *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. He wrote to an American correspondent that the book “was written principally with a view to the state of society and opinion in England” (CW 17:1618), and to Alexander Bain that it was primarily intended for female readers, with a purpose to “stimulate their aspirations” and induce them to “break down the old barriers” (CW 17:1623).

This article aims to show the importance of relating Mill’s writings to the context in which he was writing and to his engagement in the social and intellectual issues of his time. Section 2 gives some examples of social circumstances that form a necessary background for understanding his writings. Section 3 is devoted to changes in the meaning of words that are central in his texts. Section 4 discusses his shifts between different time perspectives for future social reforms. Section 5 outlines some of the rhetorical devices that he employed, and Section 6 notes some of his tactical silences. Section 7 concludes.

2. Social circumstances

I will give three examples of social circumstances that have been overlooked by modern readers. The first example concerns *proportional income taxes*. Already in 1833, Mill advocated a proportionate income tax that would “relieve the smaller incomes from direct taxation entirely” (CW 23:553). Incomes in excess of that exemption would be taxed by a fixed rate. As an example, he mentioned that if the yearly exemption was £50 and the tax was 10 %, then someone who earned £50 would pay no income tax, whereas earnings of £60 would result in a tax of £1, earnings of £1000 in a tax of £95, etc. In *Principles of Political Economy*, he endorsed the same principle, mentioning £100 as a “defensible” exemption under the prevailing circumstances (CW 3:831). In 1852, when he was heard as an expert by a parliamentary taxation committee, he again advocated proportionality above an exemption, which he now set to £150 per year. In justifying this exemption, he emphasized that those with lower incomes were burdened by the indirect taxes on necessities (CW 5:473 and 497).

When testifying before the same committee nine years later, he espoused the same principle, but used a limit of £100 as an example, "supposing that to be the minimum, as at present" (CW 5:552).

Quite a few authors have interpreted Mill's advocacy for proportionate income taxes as an indication that he was unwilling to redistribute economic resources from rich to poor. For instance, Alan Ryan asserted that one might have expected Mill to "press for progressive taxation, on egalitarian grounds," but he "did not move in this direction" (Ryan 1974, 171). Similarly, Fred Berger said that "[Mill's] rejection of a graduated income tax strikes me as poorly argued and not entirely in keeping with other positions he took" (Berger 1984, 175). E.G. West maintained that contrary to modern proponents of progressive taxation, Mill "had no concern for a redistribution plan that served the poor without the prior conditioning of their characters" (West 1978, 585), and Takuo Dome claimed that "If equalizing income distribution had been the true object of income tax, Mill could have proposed a progressive tax," which however he choose not to do (Dome 1999, 333).

However, these appraisals of Mill's proposals do not take into account the actual income structure in the society for which they were meant. As shown by Ekelund and Walker, the £100 deduction would have exempted more than 95 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom from income tax (Ekelund and Walker 1996, 572-73 and 577). This meant that in practice, Mill's proposal "shifted the burden to the wealthy, and increasingly to people with massive hereditary (landed) fortunes" (Ekelund and Walker 1996, 573; cf. Kurer 1991, 718).

The second example is the sale of poisons. In *On Liberty*, Mill emphasized that "the principle of individual liberty is not involved in the doctrine of Free Trade," and that it was therefore "undeniable" that public control aiming for instance at sanitary precautions and the protection of workers' health were legitimate. However, some interferences in trade were "essentially questions of liberty." These were cases concerning infringements on the liberty not of the seller but of the buyer, since the interference would make it "impossible or difficult to

obtain a particular commodity” (CW 18:293). One such example was the sale of poisons:

If poisons were never bought or used for any purpose except the commission of murder, it would be right to prohibit their manufacture and sale. They may, however, be wanted not only for innocent but for useful purposes, and restrictions cannot be imposed in the one case without operating in the other [...]. Such a precaution, for example, as that of labelling the drug with some word expressive of its dangerous character, may be enforced without violation of liberty: the buyer cannot wish not to know that the thing he possesses has poisonous qualities. But to require in all cases the certificate of a medical practitioner, would make it sometimes impossible, always expensive, to obtain the article for legitimate uses [...]. Precautions of a similar nature might be enforced in the sale of articles adapted to be instruments of crime. The seller, for example, might be required to enter in a register the exact time of the transaction, the name and address of the buyer, the precise quality and quantity sold: to ask the purpose for which it was wanted, and record the answer he received. When there was no medical prescription, the presence of some third person might be required, to bring home the fact to the purchaser, in case there should afterwards be reason to believe that the article had been applied to criminal purposes. Such regulations would in general be no material impediment to obtaining the article, but a very considerable one to making an improper use of it without detection. (CW 18:294-95)

This text has been interpreted as referring to drug abuse. Richard Glen Boire interprets Mill as meaning that “the laws should stop after requiring that drugs and poisons be labeled with cautionary statements.” In his view, “Mill does not believe that doctors should be the gatekeepers to drugs”

(Boire 2002, 257). However, there are strong reasons to believe that Mill was not referring to drug abuse, but rather to poisons such as arsenic.

In nineteenth-century Britain, arsenic was used in astonishing quantities for a large variety of purposes. Wheat farmers treated their seeds with arsenic, and sheep farmers used it to rid their sheep of lice, ticks, and other parasites. Arsenic was also an ingredient in rat poison, fly papers, and moth killers. It was used in stearin candles to prevent brittleness. Since several arsenic compounds had a bright green color, arsenic was present in all kinds of green objects, including green paint, wallpaper, cardboard objects, hats, gloves, textiles such as curtains, hats, socks, and ballroom gowns, artificial flowers, cosmetics, Christmas tree ornaments, toys, crayons and water colors. It was also used by dentists to destroy the dental pulp before filling a tooth, and it was prescribed by physicians against various ailments (Whorton 2010). Arsenic was sold widely in many types of shops. Physicians' reports of poisonings gave rise to demands for restrictions. However, draconic measures such as prohibiting the substance altogether were considered unrealistic since farmers and artisans of many trades could not do without it (Whorton 2010, 131). In March 1851, a bill to regulate the sale of arsenic was proposed to parliament. It contained several restrictions, including the stipulation that arsenic could only be sold to "a male person of full age." Women were excluded from buying the substance, presumably because of several notorious cases in which women had used arsenic to kill their husbands or lovers. Unsurprisingly, Mill found it "monstrous" and a "gross insult to every woman in the country" that they were all "declared unfit to have poison in their possession, lest they shall commit murder" (CW 14:63-64; cf. CW 25:1170). This opinion was shared by many others. The final Sale of Arsenic Act that was adopted on 5 June required buyers of the substance to be 21 years of age, but they could be either men or women. The regulation also contained the rules for registering of all purchases that Mill endorsed in *On Liberty* (Whorton 2010, 133-34; Anon 1851). It did not contain the labelling requirement condoned by Mill, but it required the coloring of arsenic sold in small quantities in order to prevent its confusion with other white powders.

Hence, Mill's discussion of the sale of poisons was essentially an argued approval of a comparatively strict regulation of the previously unregulated trade in arsenic. It tells us nothing about his view on what is now called recreational drugs. However, an indication that he might have been positive to some restrictions in the access to such drugs can be found in a memorandum on the administration of India that he wrote in 1858, the year before *On Liberty* was published. Concerning opium production in India, he said there that "it is matter for serious consideration whether any system involving the free cultivation of the poppy, would not expose India itself, which has hitherto been comparatively free from this kind of hurtful indulgence, to be flooded with the article at a low price" (CW 30:106; cf. CW 3:853n). Concerning alcohol, he said in *On Liberty* that its sale should be allowed since it had a "legitimate use." However, the interest of dealers in promoting intemperance was a "real evil," and therefore government was justified in "imposing restrictions and requiring guarantees that, but for that justification, would be infringements of legitimate liberty" (CW 18:297). There does not seem to be textual evidence to determine whether he considered drugs such as opium to have any legitimate use. Concerning tobacco, he argued in Parliament in 1868 that "smoking in trains had become a positive nuisance" (CW 28:328. cf. CW 28:333).

The third example concerns Mill's writings on the *brain sizes of men and women*. In *The Subjection of Women*, he went into considerable detail in answering the alleged "anatomical evidence of the superior mental capacity of men compared with women: they have a larger brain" (CW 21:310). After indicating that there might be no such difference if one compares the brains of men of women with the same body size, he criticized the inference from size to capacity:

this criterion would lead to strange consequences. A tall and large-boned man must on this showing be wonderfully superior in intelligence to a small man, and an elephant or a whale must prodigiously excel mankind. (CW 21:310-11)

In the "more delicate operations of nature," he said, differences in quality were more important than differences in quantity. Judging by the "nicety and quality" of the work done by human brains, there were indications of "a greater average fineness of quality in the brain and nervous system of women than of men" (CW 21:311). It would not be surprising, he said, "if men on the average should have the advantage in the size of the brain, and women in activity of cerebral [blood] circulation" (CW 21:311). This, he said, accorded well with the observation that men's mental operations were slower but more persistent than those of women. To conclude, he emphasized that "this speculation is entirely hypothetical; it pretends to no more than to suggest a line of enquiry," and he then reiterated his main message: it was not yet known that there was "any natural difference at all in the average strength or direction of the mental capacities of the two sexes, much less what that difference is" (CW 21:312).

In an article about *The Subjection of Women*, Julia Annas showed little patience with this argumentation:

This is the only place in *The Subjection of Women* where the argument is quite pathetic, and one is mainly surprised that Mill feels that he needs to argue at all on this level. (Annas 1977, 186)

There was, however, a rather compelling reason why Mill felt that he had to "argue at all on this level." In spite of coming across today as ridiculous, claims that white men are intellectually superior to all other human beings were established "truths" in scientific circles when he wrote this. Moreover, such claims had an important role in public argumentation against women's rights. In 1868, the influential French anthropologist Paul Broca published a paper in an English-language anthropological journal, where he warned against disturbing the "normal order" in which women bring forth and educate children, and men provide for the subsistence of the family. Any such disturbance "necessarily induces a perturbation in the evolution of races, and hence it follows that the condition of women in society must be most carefully studied by the anthropologist" (Broca 1868, 49-50). This proposal was

taken up enthusiastically by members of the London Anthropological Society. In 1869, the same year that Mill's *Subjection of Women* was published, this new task for anthropologists was discussed in their journal. According to one member,

The assertions and claims put forward under the term "Woman's Rights," are a challenge to anthropologists to consider the scientific question of woman's mental, moral, and physical qualities, her nature and normal condition relative to man. (McGrigor Allan 1869, cxcvi)

This was followed by a lengthy tirade espousing the inferiority of women. His arguments were partly based on skull measurements (*ibid.*, cciv). Another article in the same journal ridiculed the idea of female suffrage, claiming that it "would not only subvert man's civilised customs but contradict nature's first lessons" (Pike 1868, lx). These discussions led up to many years of extensive skull measurement projects, whose results were systematically misinterpreted and used to support racism and misogyny (Fee 1979).

It is against this background that we should read Mill's discussion of brain sizes. This was not a deviation to trivial matters in a tract in timeless philosophy. As mentioned above, the book was primarily written for the women's suffrage movement. In the year when it was published Mill noted that "The objection with which we are now principally met is that women are not fit for, or not capable of, this, that or the other mental achievement" (CW 17:1623). These objections were on the level illustrated in the above quotes, which is the reason why he conducted a discussion on that level. Leaving them unanswered because of their intellectual ineptitude would have been a disservice to the women for whom the book was written. As Keith Burgess-Jackson has pointed out in response to Annas, when Mill responded to the brain size arguments, he "took the arguments as he found them and said what needed to be said against them" (Burgess-Jackson 1995, 381).

Mill's hypothesis about sexual differences in blood circulation may appear odd to a modern reader, but it was not odd in comparison with the

discussion in medical journals at the time and—in particular—not in comparison with the physiological and anatomical arguments of his misogynist opponents. (Six decades later, Ivar Broman, an acclaimed Swedish anatomy professor and member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, declared with far fewer reservations that the sperms of sexually abstinent men were resorbed and “probably used as ‘power food’ for the brain cells” [Broman 1927, 20n].)

3. The meaning of words

The best way to show how linguistic shifts can complicate our interpretations of Mill is probably to provide a list of terms affected by such shifts.

In the last century or so, *logic* has been a thoroughly formalized discipline, devoted to inferences expressed with mathematical formulas rather than the inferences in natural language that previous generations of logicians were studying. Mill’s *A System of Logic* has received much less attention than what it arguably deserves. One reason for this may be that its title, although perfectly adequate when it was published, is rather misleading if read with a modern understanding of what logic is. Modern logicians will not find much that they can work with in this book, and philosophers of science are often not aware how much of it is devoted to their discipline.

Before the development of intelligence tests in the early twentieth century, *intelligence* was a general term denoting the mental faculties, and in particular capabilities of understanding. It did not have the connotations that it has now obtained due to its association with “nativistic theories in which intelligence is viewed as a qualitatively unique faculty with a relatively fixed quantity” (Schlinger 2003, 16). This difference in meaning is particularly important when we are reading Mill, who was an unusually strong believer in the equal inborn mental faculties of all human beings (CW 1:109-11, 2:319, 8:859, 21:93). In *Principles of Political Economy* he praised the lectures and discussions organized by trade unions and other workers’ associations. These activities, he said, served the purpose “to

diffuse variety of ideas among the mass, and to excite thought and reflection in the more intelligent” (CW 3:763-64). For a modern reader, the last phrase of this quotation would seem to refer to those among the workers who were born more smart than the others. But this is certainly not what he intended. It can be seen from other passages in *Principles* that he considered intelligence as something that was fostered and improved through education and exercise, rather than acquired at birth. (For instance, see CW 2:128, 247, 280-81).

Our current conception of *democracy* has been shaped by a century of extensive experiences of parliamentary democracy. In Mill’s time, democracy was a highly controversial idea, and its very meaning was still unclear. Athenian (pseudo-)democracy was direct, and when Mill was young it was not yet settled whether a representative system could be called a democracy. The two dominating figures in his education had different opinions about this. In 1817, Jeremy Bentham published a book in which he favored “representative democracy” as “the only practicable democracy” (Bentham [1817] 1843, 451). Three years later, James Mill published a dictionary entry in which he reserved the term “democracy” for what we today call direct democracy, and consequently declared that democracy was infeasible in larger societies (Mill, James, 1820). Even more importantly, the strong association between democracy and liberal ideals such as freedom of expression and toleration of minority opinions was not yet established. In the 1790s, the French revolutionaries most eager to call themselves democrats had also been the ones most dedicated to resolute action against the enemies of the people (See for instance Robespierre 1794). In Mill’s lifetime, democracy was still conceived by the ruling classes as a destructive and unworkable system. Indeed, almost a quarter century after Mill’s death, the prominent historian W.E.H. Lecky, who was also a liberal MP, published a book in which he claimed that “democracy does not harmonize well with liberty” (Lecky 1896, 214). “Democracy,” he says, “destroys the balance of opinions, interests, and classes, on which constitutional liberty mainly depends, and its constant tendency is to impair the efficiency and

authority of parliaments, which have hitherto proved the chief organs of political liberty" (Lecky 1896, 212).

In summary, democracy was in Mill's times an extreme standpoint, promoted by socialist and working-class organizations and a few other radicals, but repudiated by mainstream conservatives and liberals (Christophersen 1966). This is a necessary background to understand Mill's uses of the word "democracy." Although he identified himself as a democrat, he sometimes did this with reservations. In particular, he was worried "by the difficulty of reconciling democratic institutions with the maintenance of a great social support for dissentient opinions" (CW 15:653). This was a more common, and arguably also less unreasonable, worry when democracy was still an untested idea than what it is today.

The term *dictatorship* has gone through a radical transformation of meanings. In ancient Rome it denoted the conferment of exceptional authority to a trusted citizen for a limited period of time, in order to solve an urgent issue such as a military emergency. In the nineteenth century this was still what the word usually meant, and it did not imply tyranny as it now does. Only in the 1920s, after the Bolsheviks had adopted the term as part of their ominous slogan "dictatorship of the proletariat," did it change meanings to become a synonym of despotism or tyranny (Spencer 1931; Mayer 1993). For instance, the entry "dictator" in the 1877 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* did not mention any other meaning of the term than a ruler with time-limited, extraordinary powers (Anon. 1877).

In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Mill accepted "in cases of extreme exigency, the assumption of absolute power in the form of a temporary dictatorship." However, his acceptance had the important condition that "the dictator employs the whole power he assumes in removing the obstacles which debar the nation from the enjoyment of freedom" (CW 19:403; cf. CW 25:1097-98.) In a parliamentary debate on the Reform Act of 1867 he opined that "in revolutionary times" it might be required "to dispense with all law, and, if necessary, to have a dictatorship in the hands of one man." However, that was "altogether an exceptional case," which did not apply "in

ordinary and peaceful times,” and for which it was not possible to legislate (CW 28:211).

In at least three cases he advocated or at least accepted what he called “dictatorship” in particular situations. In January 1838 he described the British military and political reactions to the Canadian Rebellions as the justified actions of an “armed umpire” in a country “divided into two parties, exasperated, by the taste of each other’s blood, beyond the possibility of a peaceful accommodation.” He described the regime as a “dictatorship which has been assumed, and of which Lord Durham is the immediate depository” (CW 6:431). In a letter to Sarah Austin in March 1848 he expressed his confidence in the Provisional Government that had just taken over in Paris, and said that it was “very natural that the Provisional Gov[ernment] should exert its temporary dictatorship to prevent a precipitate flight of foreigners *en masse*” (CW 13:733). In an article published in April 1848, he again praised the Provisional Government, calling them “nominal dictators, without either soldiers or police whom they could call to their assistance” (CW 20:333). Most remarkably, in 1865 he proposed that after the American Civil War, federal authorities should maintain a “military dictatorship” in the former confederate states for “a very great length of time” in order to ensure that all remnants of slavery were wiped out (CW 16:1099). (Arguably, he somewhat stretched the meaning of “dictatorship” here.) These passages could easily be misunderstood by modern readers. Similar misunderstandings of Karl Marx’s use of the term have been disseminated by ideologues usurping Marx’s texts for anti-democratic purposes (Draper 1962; Hunt 1975, 284-336). Luckily, Mill has been spared such totalitarian followers.

The term *liberalism* has changed in meaning largely in consequence of the acceptance of democracy as an overarching ideology. In Mill’s times, most of the politicians identifying themselves as liberals opposed general suffrage (as well as general male suffrage). “Most of the liberal members” of Parliament, said Mill in a letter to Thomas Hare in 1866, “are not real reformers, and only vote for any reform because they are

obliged, and in the hope of getting rid of the question" (CW 16:1138). The "reform" he referred to here was extension of the suffrage. This seems to have been the reason why he carefully avoided calling himself a "liberal" *simpliciter*, and instead used the terms "advanced liberal" or "radical" (Hansson 2013). The significance of the term "advanced" in these contexts has seldom been realized. However, it is nevertheless fairly unproblematic to call Mill a liberal today; at least in terms of his views on popular rule he was much more of a liberal in the present-day sense of the word than in that of his own times.

The term *socialism*, introduced by Owenites in the early 1820s, had a much wider sense in the early nineteenth century than today. It was used about various strivings and schemes to solve "the social question," not necessarily through radical changes in the system of property (Gans 1957; de Sauvigny 1970; Hansson 1995). For instance, in 1847 the French Saint-Simonian philosopher Pierre Leroux wrote that "[d]epuis quelques années, on s'est habitué à appeler *socialistes* tous les penseurs qui s'occupent de réformes sociales" (Leroux [1847] 1850, 376; cf. Lalande 1962, 1277). Mill seems to have vacillated between a wide and a more limited definition of the term. In *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) he defined socialism as "any system which requires that the land and the instruments of production should be the property, not of individuals, but of communities or associations, or of the government" (CW 2:203; cf. CW 5:738-39), but in an essay published in April 1849 he defined it more widely as "the modern form of the protest, which has been raised, more or less, in all ages of any mental activity, against the unjust distribution of social advantages" (CW 20:351). Also when referring to his own socialist ideas, he sometimes used the wider and sometimes the more restricted variant. In a letter from 1848 he described himself as a socialist in the sense of "calling for an entire renovation of social institutions and doctrines" (CW 13:739; cf. CW 14:53). In *Principles* he endorsed a system in which the accumulations of capital are "the joint property of all who participate in their productive employment," which he also identified as the standpoint of "the Socialist writers" (CW 3:793-94). Importantly, his endorsement of socialism—here and elsewhere—

referred to what we would today call worker-owned companies, rather than state-owned companies. We therefore have to distinguish between Mill's definition of socialism, which was fairly wide, and the specific form of socialism which he championed.

Finally, the word *communism* became frequent around 1840, and was often used as a synonym of "socialism." Notably, it was not yet tainted by the connection with anti-democratic and despotic practices and ideas that it obtained with the Russian Revolution. Communism was closely associated with the word "community," and it was often interpreted as "community of property" (Bestor 1948). Some authors, including Mill, used "socialism" in the wide sense just referred to, and "communism" to denote some specific version of it that required community of property. In *Principles*, Mill defined communists as those among the "assailants of the principle of individual property" who required "absolute equality in the distribution of the physical means of life and enjoyment." He also maintained that communists required "the entire abolition of private property," whereas (other) socialists only required that "the land and the instruments of production should be the property, not of individuals, but of communities or associations, or of the government" (CW 2:202-3). The difference between this notion of communism and that which developed in the early twentieth century is still essential. For instance, he wrote in *Principles* that "The restraints of Communism would be freedom in comparison with the present condition of the majority of the human race" (CW 2:209). This has to be understood in terms of what the word "communism" meant before it became associated with the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution.

4. Shifting time perspectives

Mill had a strong belief in the moral improvability of mankind. In a future, much better, society based on higher moral principles, social arrangements would be possible that were unworkable in the near future. In particular, a "change of character" obtained through education would make people willing to work for common purposes rather than just for

themselves (CW1:239). In consequence, he often found reasons to distinguish between the policies that were advisable already in the short run and those that were desirable but not yet possible to implement. For instance, although he always held universal suffrage to be desirable, he was for a long time convinced that due to the low level of education, Britain was not yet ripe for it (CW 18:32, 6:482-83, 19:470). He was in favor of an organization of economic production that made workers partners, rather than bought instruments in the production, but this would only be possible "at some distant date" (CW 4:382). A system of equal pay would be preferable to more unequal wage systems such as piecework, but it would not be possible "until education shall have been entirely regenerated" (CW 2:210).

In much of the discussion on Mill's social and political philosophy, these distinctions have not been sufficiently attended to. For instance, writers anxious to enlist him in the non-socialist camp have usually focused on the passages where he warned against the premature introduction of socialist principles. Writers who seek his support for socialist reforms have instead devoted their attention to the passages where he expounded the benefits of the workers' cooperatives that would become possible in a future, morally improved society. An account that does justice to both his short-term and his long-term perspectives on the organization of production can provide a better understanding of his thoughts (but it may be less useful for immediate political purposes).

An interesting example of his time frames can be found in a much-quoted passage from the *Autobiography*. Referring to himself and Harriet Taylor, Mill wrote:

We were now much less democrats than I had been, because so long as education continues to be so wretchedly imperfect, we dreaded the ignorance and especially the selfishness and brutality of the mass: but our ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists. (CW 1:239)

The small phrase “so long as” is important for understanding his message. As mentioned above, Mill favored democracy as a long-term goal for social development, but he often had apprehensions that its immediate introduction would be premature.

5. Rhetoric

Like all skilled rhetoricians, Mill used a variety of rhetorical methods for different purposes. I will focus here on two quite different methods, which he used on different occasions.

One of these is a method that he himself referred to, and named “practical eclecticism” (CW 12:42). When he was twenty-three years old, he described it in two letters to Gustave d’Eichthal. He believed that “not errors but half truths are the bane of human improvement,” and therefore the proper way to proceed “for a person who pursues the good of mankind” would consist “not in attacking men’s wrong opinions, but in giving them that knowledge which will enable them to form right ones that will push off the wrong ones” (CW12:42). This gave rise to the following strategy:

I am averse to any mode of eradicating error, but by establishing and inculcating (when that is practicable) the opposite truth; a truth of some kind inconsistent with that moral or intellectual state of mind from which the errors arise. It is only thus that we can at once maintain the good that already exists, and produce more. And I object to placing myself in the situation of an advocate for or against a cause [...]. In short, I do not insist upon making others give up their own point of view & adopt mine, but I endeavor myself to unite whatever is not optical illusion in both. When by this means I shall have clearly embraced in my own view the entire truth, & shall be able to represent to others that whole, of which they have before seen a part, I shall have great confidence in their ultimate adoption of it. (CW 12:45-46)

In one of these letters he also said that "I have a great dislike to controversy" (CW 12:45), but that is arguably not his most trustworthy self-characterization.

In a letter to Thomas Carlyle in 1833 he gave further grounds for this approach, saying that it was "my creed that Truth is sown and germinates in the mind itself, and is not to be struck *out* suddenly like fire from a flint by knocking another hard body against it: so I accustomed myself to *learn* by inducing others to deliver their thoughts, and to teach by scattering my own, and I eschewed occasions of controversy" (CW 12:153). In the same vein, he said in his essay *Coleridge* (1840) that the value of a thinker's work "can only be justly estimated when his thoughts have worked their way into minds formed in a different school; have been wrought and molded into consistency with all other true and relevant thoughts," and this could only happen after "the noisy conflict of half-truths, angrily denying one another" had ended (CW 10:122). These half-truths were needed, however, since they were "as necessary to one another in speculation, as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution" (CW 10:122). Truth could then be obtained by combining ideas from the different sides:

It might be plausibly maintained that in almost every one of the leading controversies, past or present, in social philosophy, both sides were in the right in what they affirmed, though wrong in what they denied; and that if either could have been made to take the other's views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct. (CW 10:122-23)

It does not take much acquaintance with Mill's writings to see that far from all of his writings comply with his intention to act as a practical eclectic, emphasizing the tenable parts of all positions at hand, and inducing their proponents to combine their own half-truths with some of those held by their adversaries. But in some of his works, he did actually follow such a strategy. Many of the best examples can be found in *Principles of Political Economy*. He rarely attacked the views of other

economists, but instead emphasized the valid claims made by those with whom he did not entirely agree. As shown by de Marchi, he employed a “strategy of conciliation” in his treatment of contentious technical issues in economics (de Marchi 1974, 140-41). He also employed this strategy in his discussions of more directly policy-oriented economic issues. For instance, he began his discussion of poor laws by pointing out that there would not be much need for poor relief “if the habits of all classes of the people were temperate and prudent” (thus satisfying *laissez faire*-oriented readers), and then went on to emphasize that fundamental moral principles strongly demand that we help destitute fellow beings (thus satisfying readers in favor of public welfare). This is followed by a paragraph asserting that the consequences of helping can be injurious to an extent “as greatly to outweigh the value of the benefit” (again satisfying the *laissez-faire* proponents), after which follows a paragraph affirming that these negative consequences can also result from “absence of help, as well as by its excesses” (once more appeasing the supporters of public welfare” (CW 3:960-61). And so it goes on.

The other rhetorical method is one that Mill does not give a name, but that he nevertheless confessed to employing. We can call it *tactical overreach*. It consists in advocacy of proposals that are so far-going that they cannot realistically be achieved, at least not within reasonable time. This is done with the purpose to pave the way for other, more realistic proposals. He described this strategy in his *Autobiography* in connection with the pamphlet *England and Ireland*, which he published in 1868. It advocated both Irish independence and a right for all Irish tenants to receive a permanent tenure at a fixed and fair rent. The pamphlet was not popular in England, and he had not expected it to be so. However, he still considered it a success:

I well knew that to propose something which would be called extreme was the true way not to impede but to facilitate a more moderate experiment. It is most improbable that a measure conceding so much to the tenantry, as Mr. Gladstone’s Irish Land Bill, would have

been proposed by a Government, or could have been carried through Parliament, unless the British public had been led to perceive that a case might be made, and perhaps a party formed, for a measure considerably stronger. It is the character of the British people, or at least of the higher and middle classes who pass muster for the British people, that to induce them to approve of any change it is necessary that they should look upon it as a middle course: they think every proposal extreme and violent unless they hear of some other proposal going still farther, upon which their antipathy to extreme views may discharge itself. So it proved in the present instance; my proposal was condemned, but any scheme of Irish Land reform, short of mine, came to be thought moderate by comparison. (CW 1:280)

In a letter to Alexander Bain in 1869, Mill explained why, in the recently published *Subjection of Women*, he had gone so far as to claim that women were in no respects intellectually inferior to men. Bain had argued that these far-reaching claims were unnecessary; the major political proposals in the book could have been defended on the basis of less extreme premises. In his view, "the equality of rights did not presuppose absolute equality of faculties" (Bain 1882, 131). Mill answered that the more cautious argumentation proposed by Bain would have been right ten years earlier, but the question had now entered a more advanced stage:

The most important thing we now have to do, is to stir up the zeal of women themselves [...]. This is more important now than to conciliate opponents. But I do not believe that opponents will be at all exasperated by taking this line. On the contrary I believe the point has now been reached at which, the higher we pitch our claims, the more disposition there will be to concede part of them. All I have yet heard of the reception of the new book

confirms this idea. People tell me that it is lowering the tone of our opponents as well as raising that of our supporters. (CW 17:1623-24)

Hence, in these two cases, when Mill took what may have seemed to be imprudent positions, he himself believed his pronouncements to be quite effective due to the mechanisms of tactical overreach. This raises the question whether he followed similar schemes when he took other unpopular positions. The obvious alternative explanation is that he decided to “stand up for what is right” even if the chances were slim that this would push the issue in the right direction. Perhaps the most obvious cases where this question arises are his strong anti-slavery and anti-racist standpoints and his staunch support of the North in the American Civil War. As documented by Georgios Varouxakis, these standpoints were unpopular, not only among conservatives who favored the Confederacy, but also among liberals who opposed slavery but considered the bloodshed of a civil war to be a too high price to get rid of it (Varouxakis 2013, 729). A passage in a letter to David Urquhart in 1866 indicates that his decision to go public with these issues was indeed taken on principled, rather than calculated grounds:

But my eyes were first opened to the moral condition of the English nation (I except in these matters the working classes) by the atrocities perpetrated in the Indian Mutiny & the feelings which supported them at home. Then came the sympathy with the lawless rebellion of the Southern Americans in defence of an institution [slavery] which is the sum of all lawlessness, as Wesley said it was of all villainy—and finally came this Jamaica business the authors of which from the first day I knew of it I determined that I would do all in my power to bring to justice if there was not another man in Parl[iamen]t to stand by me. (CW 16:1205-6)

6. Tactical silence

By "tactical silence" I mean a deliberate choice not to express opinions that one holds, based on the expectation that doing so could have negative consequences. Such potential negative consequences can be imposed by political or religious authorities, or they can result from "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling," which Mill described so convincingly in *On Liberty* (CW 18:220). There are at least two areas in which we have reasons to believe that he exerted tactical silence. One of them is religion. He was probably more strongly critical of religion than what can be seen from his writings (Bain 1882, 133-40). Atheism was a condemned position in his lifetime. Other intellectuals who did not believe in God chose not to express their disbelief in public; a couple of those who did so were sent to prison (Berman 1988, 191-247).

The other such area is the relation between women and men, certain aspects of which Mill seems to have been silent on for tactical reasons. In particular, it is quite obvious from his private writings that he was in favor of full rights to divorce, equally for women and men. In an unpublished essay, written for his future wife in 1832 or 1833, he concluded in favor of "leaving this like the other relations voluntarily contracted by human beings, to depend for its continuance upon the wishes of the contracting parties" (CW 21:49). In a letter to an unidentified recipient, written in 1855, he again expressed the same opinion:

My opinion on Divorce is that though any relaxation of the irrevocability of marriage would be an improvement, nothing ought to be ultimately rested in, short of entire freedom on both sides to dissolve this like any other partnership. The only thing requiring legal regulation would be the maintenance of the children when the parents could not arrange it amicably—& in that I do not see any considerable difficulty (CW 14:500; cf. also CW 10:199, 311-12; 14:161, 298; 17:1618; 21:45, 354-55; 23:678-79; and 25:1181-82).

Yet, he avoided taking a public stand on divorce. In 1850 he declined to write an article on the topic, since his opinions were "so totally opposed

to the reigning notions, that it would probably be inexpedient to express all of them & I must consider whether the portion of them which the state of existing opinion would make it advisable to express, would be sufficient to make the undertaking a suitable or satisfactory one to me” (CW 14:48). In *On Liberty*, Mill criticized a legislation that bound women to oppressive marriages, but he did not endorse a right to divorce (CW 18:300-301; cf. Kha 2018). Nor did he express any opinion on divorce in *The Subjection of Women*. In a letter written just after the book was published, he explained this as follows:

I thought it best not to discuss the questions about marriage & divorce along with that of the equality of women; not only from the obvious inexpediency of establishing a connexion in people’s minds between the equality, & any particular opinions on the divorce question, but also because I do not think that the conditions of the dissolubility of marriage can be properly determined until women have an equal voice in determining them, nor until there has been experience of the marriage relation as it would exist between equals. Until then I should not like to commit myself to more than the general principle of relief from the contract in extreme cases. (CW 17:1634; cf. CW 21:285 and 29:379)

This tactical silence should be seen in the light (or rather darkness) of the exceptionally strong counter-reactions that *The Subjection of Women* gave rise to, even without a standpoint on divorce. It caused him more antagonism and derision than anything else that he wrote (Okin 1973, 123-24; Pyle 1994).

In a letter in 1869 to the American suffragette and abolitionist Isabella Hooker, Mill commented on “the infinitely closer relationship of a child to its mother than to its father.” This was a sensitive issue, “for which the human mind will not, for some time, be sufficiently prepared to make its discussion useful.” However, he did not see this closer relationship as proof that women have “a natural superiority in capacity of moral excellence.” Instead, it was “the fruit of education & cultivation, & I see no reason to doubt that both sexes are equally capable of that description of cultivation” (CW17:1640).

This was arguably a much more radical view than his espousal of a right to divorce. He does not seem to have written about it elsewhere. It is a plausible hypothesis that it was also subject to his tactical silence.

7. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that understanding John Stuart Mill's writings is a task with all kinds of pitfalls and stumbling blocks. However, this certainly does not mean that it is a task with no chance of progress. As we all know from everyday life, understanding another human being is one of those undertakings in which perfection is never possible, but improvement always is. That applies equally to the interpretation of writers from bygone days. In the case of John Stuart Mill, closer attention to the context in which he wrote can contribute substantially to such improvement.

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