# Mill: The Spirit of the Age, On Liberty, The Subjection of Women

Selected and Edited by Alan Ryan

A Norton Critical Edition

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# MILL

## The Spirit of the Age, On Liberty, The Subjection of Women

TEXTS

COMMENTARIES

*Selected and Edited by*

ALAN RYAN

NEW COLLEGE, OXFORD

An expanded and revised edition based on the Norton Critical Edition of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, edited by David Spitz

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# Preface

The first edition of this Norton Critical Edition was published in 1975, edited by the late David Spitz. Two decades later, there has been a continued flow of critical work on Mill, while writers have become increasingly interested in the connections between *On Liberty* and Mill's other writings, whether early like "The Spirit of the Age" or late like *The Subjection of Women*. For this edition, I therefore have added "The Spirit of the Age" and *The Subjection of Women* to *On Liberty*. I have retained R. H. Hutton's review of *On Liberty* from the first edition, together with David Spitz's selections from Fitzjames Stephen's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, but I have changed the later essays entirely. Isaiah Berlin's "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life" provides an overview of Mill's liberalism; an extract from Gertrude Himmelfarb's *On Liberty and Liberalism* provides reasons for preferring "The Spirit of the Age" to *On Liberty*; John Rees's "The Principle of Liberty" explains what "harms" Mill thought justified legal and other sanctions; Jeremy Waldron's "Mill and the Value of Moral Distress" explains what Mill refused to count as "harm"; and Susan Okin's "Mill's Feminist Egalitarianism" assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Mill's feminism. Because I have provided a substantial biographical and analytical introduction, I have reduced Professor Spitz's footnotes to the first edition; the notes now provide literary, historical, and biographical references and translate quotations. Mill's own notes are, of course, left intact. I was a good, though not a close, friend of David Spitz and an admirer of his work; I hope this new edition maintains intellectual standards he would have approved of. I am happy to end by thanking Sadie Ryan for her very considerable labors in helping to put this new edition together.

# Introduction

## Life

John Stuart Mill was born on May 20, 1806, in north London and died at Avignon on May 6, 1873. He was the oldest of the nine children of James Mill (1773–1836) and his wife, Harriet (née Burrow.) Mill left an extraordinary account of his life in his *Autobiography* (1873),[1] one extremely relevant to the essays in this volume, concerned as they are with self-creation, with the liberty of both men and women, and with authority in a secular society. Mill's *Autobiography* exerts a great emotional grip on everyone who reads it. Mill was at pains to treat his life with a detached scientific objectivity and to present it to his readers only as an example of what a well-designed education could achieve with what he claimed to be very ordinary raw material. In reality, Mill was unusually intelligent, unusually sensitive, and to a distressing degree the victim of tougher but less subtle people than himself; the *Autobiography* is engrossing because it reveals all this in spite of its author's best efforts. He felt emotionally deprived but morally obliged to transcend such feelings—and, of course, could not entirely do so.

A striking feature of the *Autobiography* is the complete absence of Mill's mother. "I was born in London," writes Mill, "on the 20th of May 1806, and was the eldest son of James Mill, the author of *The History of British India*."[2] Even in Victorian fairy tales children are not taken down from a bookshelf. In a draft of his opening chapter cut before publication, Mill devoted three sentences to his mother, notable both for their coldness and for what they suggest of the author's thwarted need for affection and encouragement.

> That rarity in England, a really warm-hearted mother, would in the first place have made my father a totally different being, and in the second would have made his children grow up loving and being loved. But my mother, with the very best of intentions, only

1. The *Autobiography* has been published in innumerable editions; the best is in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (CW), vol. 1, edited by John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto, 1981). As with all the volumes in the Toronto edition, the introduction is an impressive work of scholarship in its own right. This edition also contains Mill's early drafts of the *Autobiography* as well as an engrossing few paragraphs on his father and mother and a lengthy panegyric on the mind and character of Mrs. Taylor that were cut out before publication.
2. CW, vol. 1, 4.

> knew how to pass her life in drudging for them. Whatever she could do for them she did, and they liked her, because she was kind to them, but to make herself loved, looked up to, or even obeyed, required qualities which she unfortunately did not possess.[3]

Other observers agreed that Mill's mother was an attractive young woman, but without intellectual interests and unfit to be the companion of a hard-driving, clever, and ambitious man like James Mill. She became a *Hausfrau*, good natured but querulous—and as her son certainly felt, ground down by bearing nine children in as many years. J. S. Mill's unkindness was not just a matter of childhood miseries surfacing in later years. He was also bitterly resentful of what he fancied was a lack of respect on the part of his mother toward the woman he had married in 1851, a few years before he wrote these pages. The contrast between Harriet Mill, his mother, and Harriet Mill, his wife, will occupy us again below, but the author of *The Subjection of Women* knew something of what subjected and liberated women were. His mother was the victim of both her son's chief mentors.

James Mill, by contrast, was all willpower and self-confidence. He had been born in humble circumstances in the little Scottish town of Northwater Bridge but attracted the attention of a member of the local gentry, Sir John Stuart—after whom his eldest son was named. Sir John's assistance enabled Mill to attend Edinburgh University. It became clear that he could never practice the profession to which this naturally led, that of the ministry, so he made his way to London, where he edited *The Anti-Jacobin* and later made himself indispensable to Jeremy Bentham. His role in "philosophical radicalism"—the loose-knit reform movement of the early 1800s built around *The Westminster Review*—was that of publicist and propagandist. He had a great talent for the clear, almost brutally clear, exposition of complicated ideas. He once memorably offered to write an account of the human mind that would make its operations "as plain as the road from St. Paul's to Charing Cross"; and in 1820, he published *An Essay on Government* that advanced with breathtaking speed from the premise that each man pursues his own interests to the conclusion that the only valid form of government was democracy—in which the people would pursue their interests, not those of some group or section.[4] In the same spirit he exercised enormous power over the largest of British colonial possessions. Until 1858, the Indian subcontinent was governed by the East India Company, which by the early nineteenth century was an agency operating a "contracted-out" form of government rather than a trading company. James Mill was the chief civil servant in the company's Lon-

3. "Early Draft Rejected Leaves," CW, vol. 1, 612.
4. It was savaged by Macaulay in one of the funniest essays in political controversy ever penned; see John Rees and Jack Lively, eds., *Utilitarian Logic and Politics* (Oxford, 1983).

don office. The government of India wholly depended on the energy and expertise of its civil servants—indeed the term *civil servant* was coined to distinguish the East India Company's civilian employees and administrators from its "military servants," the soldiers with whom it preserved order. As the chief permanent official of the company, Mill's authority was as great as that of a minister in any British government.

## Education

James Mill passionately believed in education. He had risen from obscurity by taking advantage of educational opportunity, and philosophical radicalism rested on the assumptions that human nature was malleable, that superstition and prejudice could be abolished by education, and that governments could be compelled to govern in the interests of the common people once the common people had the vote and the intelligence to use it to hold their rulers to account. Young John was the beneficiary of his father's belief. Readers of the *Autobiography* have never been of one mind about the education he received at his father's hands. The late-nineteenth-century intellectual historian Leslie Stephen thought it was cram and that boys ought to play more cricket. Mill faced that complaint in another of the "rejected leaves" that he omitted from the *Autobiography* and dismissed it. As a radical social critic of somewhat mystical leanings, Thomas Carlyle cared nothing for cricket but thought Mill's education had been an experiment in "manufacturing" a soul, and deplored it accordingly. For some years in his middle twenties, Mill was inclined to agree. Literary critics from F. R. Leavis on have suggested that Charles Dickens's description of the education handed out by Gradgrind in *Hard Times* was modeled on what James Mill provided for John. This is at least partly mistaken; whatever Dickens's inspiration may have been, John Mill's education was utterly unlike Sissy Jupe's suffering from Gradgrind's emphasis on *facts*.[5] James Mill cared for theory and analysis, rather than facts, and although John Mill complained that his education had been lacking in the poetic spirit, he read an astonishing quantity of poetry by the time he was a teenager. Mill learned Greek at three, by the advanced method of using "flash cards" with Greek and English equivalents on them. He learned Latin at eight. As soon as he was fluent, he read ancient history, Greek and Latin verse, and modern historians such as Robertson and Millar. He became a competent mathematician and at twelve learned logic, economics, and philosophy. At fourteen he went to France for a year to stay with Jeremy Bentham's brother, Sir Samuel Bentham, and become fluent in French.

Mill insisted that he was not made conceited by all this, though he

5. K. J. Fielding, "Mill and Gradgrind," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 11 (1953), 148–51.

confessed that many of his father's friends mistook his argumentative style for arrogance. His father insisted that he should argue through every idea he was offered, and he was too frightened of his father to refuse. His own sentiments were of the extreme inadequacy of his attainments. The account of his relations with his father that he offers in other "rejected leaves" of the *Autobiography* makes it all too credible that he felt as diffident as he says there. The chief characteristic of his father's treatment of him was its unkindness. Until he joined the East India Company in 1819, James Mill was anxious because he had no settled income, burdened by writing his *History* and cursed with an impatient temper. Since he had no idea just how intelligent his son was, he constantly criticized him and led him to think that he was dimmer than the average.[6] James Mill's younger children benefited from their brother's suffering and were treated more kindly. But in regard to the themes that dominate the essays in this volume, it is of interest that Mill complained that his father's ferocity tended to weaken, or even destroy, his will.

> To have been, through childhood, under the constant rule of a strong will, certainly is not favourable to strength of will. I was so much accustomed to expect to be told what to do, either in the form of direct command or of rebuke for not doing it, that I acquired a habit of leaving my responsibility as a moral agent to rest on my father, my conscience never speaking to me except by his voice. The things I ought *not* to do were mostly provided for by his precepts, rigorously enforced whenever violated, but the things I *ought* to do I hardly ever did of my own mere motion, but waited till he told me to do them; and if he forbore or forgot to tell me, they were generally left undone. I thus acquired a habit of backwardness, of waiting to follow the lead of others, an absence of moral spontaneity, an inactivity of the moral sense and even to a large extent, of the intellect, unless aroused by the appeal of some one else,—for which a large abatement must be made from the benefits, either moral or intellectual, which flowed from any other part of my education.[7]

By the age of fourteen, he was better educated than most men of forty and already a formidable intellectual figure, but emotionally insecure. It was not out of the question that he should go to Cambridge a year or two later, but it was clear that he would not learn very much from the ordinary course of undergraduate studies there. Accordingly, in 1823, at the age of seventeen, he joined the East India Company as a junior clerk—that is, as an apprentice administrator—in his father's department and started on a career that ended thirty-five years later

6. Psychologists who try to guess what the measured IQ of distinguished figures from the past might have been usually place Mill at the top of the chart with a guessed IQ of 192.
7. CW, vol. 1, 613.

when the company was dissolved and he refused an appointment to the India Council that succeeded it. The office did not consume all his energies, and he began at this point to write short essays for radical newspapers such as *The Examiner*, in which his "Spirit of the Age" essays later appeared, and for radical journals, especially the *Westminster Review*. These were written from the standpoint of his father and Bentham; they were utilitarian, radical, and reformist, and Mill rightly regarded them as a beginner's practice pieces.

## Disillusionment

Less happily, he acted as ammanuensis to Jeremy Bentham while the latter was compiling his *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*. This was exhausting and tedious work. Bentham's attempt to bring order to the English Law was conducted in a very disorderly fashion. His notes were illegible, scattered hither and yon, even pinned to the drapes of his windows. Mill assembled the intended book after three years of unremitting effort, and at twenty he felt as exhausted as many men after a lifetime's work. Then he asked himself a fatal question. Having grown up to believe that his father's and Bentham's projects for the improvement of the lives of their fellow creatures were entirely rational, Mill paused: "I put the question distinctly to myself, 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized, that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant; would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' and an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered 'No!' "[8] It was a decisive moment. Utilitarianism, the doctrine that the only thing of ultimate value in the world is happiness and that all institutions, activities, and states of mind are valuable only to the extent that they promote happiness, stands or falls by the answer to the question whether utilitarians really will be happy. Mill's answer doomed—apparently—either himself or the doctrine or both. He fell into a depression from which he emerged only many months later.

Mill's account of what he called "a crisis in my mental life" is low-key. He says that he was in low spirits and overworked, as though it were the kind of late-adolescent depression that any hardworking and ambitious young man might suffer—and perhaps it partly was. Yet, it formed a hinge in his life, and he rightly devoted an entire chapter of his *Autobiography* to it: before it, he had been his father's child, the product of an education devised by somebody else, created not creative. His condition had been that to which many women are condemned all their lives, acted on, not acting, working out plans made for them by others. After he had analyzed to his own satisfaction what had been

8. CW, vol. 1, 137–38.

missing in his education and how he could replace it, he became his own man, the captain of his own fate. Two features of the experience bear directly on the essays in this volume. First, Mill's account of his experience applies to his individual case the view of the French Revolution that he learned from Carlyle and the St.-Simonian missionaries who came to London in the late 1820s with whom he made close friends. This view was that the revolution happened with the suddenness and completeness that it did because the *ancien régime* was a "sham," a fraud, an untruth.[9] Once the fraud was detected, the old regime collapsed.

The eighteenth century, represented both by the monarchical regime of Louis XVI and by the revolutionaries of 1789, had a thin and inadequate grasp of social and individual truth. Mill came to think that his father and Bentham were essentially eighteenth-century figures; they had a mechanical, overly rationalist and analytical picture of human nature and human society. Their reforming schemes were too simple to carry emotional conviction; they seemed logically compelling, but they had no purchase on the soul. Mill thus underwent a real revolution in his ideas and his feelings. After it, the truth about how we might improve society or the individual appeared much more complex than before. Now Mill took Goethe's motto—"manysidedness"—as his own. Indeed, the very idea of "truth" in human affairs acquired an emotional, or poetic, dimension it had lacked in the thought of Bentham and James Mill. In his almost absurdly calm way, Mill declared that poetry had saved him and that the poet who had done most for him was Wordsworth, "the poet of unpoetical natures"; this has led critics to scoff at Mill for treating poetry as a form of therapy, but wrongly. Mill's view may or may not be sound, but it had nothing to do with therapy. What he had in mind was the accessibility of the truths perceived by a particular writer. Wordsworth came closer than other Romantic poets to saying what he meant; unpoetical natures needed to make less of a leap of the imagination to understand him.

The second idea that Mill seized on was that human character was not formed once and for all, that it was not an inflexible carapace. Bentham and James Mill shared with Robert Owen the view that education should inculcate in malleable infants the habits that would make them useful to themselves and everyone else. Character once properly formed need not be reformed. It was assumed rather too readily that character could be formed by any more or less intelligent parent in such a way that everyone would find happiness in working for the general welfare—whence Mill's despair. But this view of character displayed little concern with freedom, not freedom in the sense of the usual political liberties and the rule of law, but freedom in the sense

9. R. D. Cumming, "John Stuart Mill's History of His Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 25 (1968), 235–56.

of the individual's own consciousness of himself or herself as a free agent. Robert Owen denied outright that individuals possessed that sort of freedom; and Jeremy Bentham had scoffed at the thought that individuals could want the freedom to make themselves miserable. It is not surprising that Mill described the doctrine of determinism as "lying like an incubus" on his spirits during the months of his depression.

He came to see, dimly at first, but later quite clearly, that he must neither throw away a concern with character nor see character as Robert Owen had done. Intelligent beings needed some fixity of character; they needed both a compass and the motive power to move in the chosen direction. Yet it must always be possible for them to stand back, look at their existing habits, desires, beliefs, and the other psychic elements that made up their characters and decide to change them. This new view of truth and this understanding of character as something *self*-created, gave Mill the two central ideas of *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*. It is not surprising that this should all emerge in the *Autobiography*. Mill wrote the first draft of the *Autobiography* at the time he was writing *On Liberty*; his account of his "mental crisis" was essentially crafted in the light of his later ideas. It is not a young man's spontaneous creation but a middle-aged man's reflection on what that young man's experience had meant.

## The East India Company

None of Mill's friends noticed that he was in emotional turmoil. Neither did his employers at the East India Company. From his twenties onward, he was intermittently unwell, and in his early thirties he suffered some sort of brain trauma that left him with a nervous tic and a twitch in his left eye that stayed with him all his life. This and other mishaps necessitated occasional lengthy periods of leave and rest, but Mill rose steadily in the East India Company, writing dispatches and deciding policy on the so-called Princely States, the Indian states that governed themselves under the general supervision of the company while preserving a nominal independence. His work sheds little direct light on the subjects dealt with here. The converse is less true. Mill was unusual among nineteenth-century Indian administrators in looking forward to the day when the Indian subcontinent would be home to a modern, self-governing society and no longer in need of the tutelage of the British. For this to happen, the Indian people must acquire the character appropriate to self-government—far-sighted, provident, self-controlled, and eager for freedom. Like his father, Mill was to a twentieth-century eye too quick to dismiss Hinduism as a tissue of servile superstitions, but unlike his father he wanted to give something more than efficient administration to their subjects. Mill was suffi-

ciently convinced of the virtues of the company as a provider of that education for liberty to undertake its defence when it was facing extinction in 1858. His defence contained a number of characteristic ideas; the most relevant here was his argument that the curious system whereby the company was not a branch of the British government but was nonetheless answerable to it for its management of Indian affairs provided what Mill and Tocqueville declared to be essential for progress—a way to create an "antagonism of opinions."[1] The company was unique among British institutions in the care with which it chose, trained, and promoted its administrators, but they were then checked up on by Parliament, so combining efficiency and accountability. If company rule was technically a "despotism," because it was not answerable to the Indian people, it was an "improving" government, dedicated to progress—and "progress" is one of two or three key concepts of *On Liberty*.[2]

## Harriet Taylor

If Mill said too little about the effect on his mental development of his occupation at India House, he said perhaps too much about the greatest influence on his life—or perhaps the greatest after his father. He met Harriet Taylor in 1830; he was twenty-four and so was she. She had married young, found her husband dull, had found childbirth extremely unpleasant, and therefore found the rarified charms of Mill's intelligence irresistible. To judge by their letters, Mill would have pursued a more indiscreet and sensual liaison had it been offered; but it was not. For the next twenty-one years they pursued a chaste relationship that was at once touching, absurd, pure, high-minded, and scandalous. They went on holidays together but never went into society as a couple; Harriet Taylor's husband, John, behaved with astonishing self-restraint and forbearance. He insisted that Mill and Mrs. Taylor avoid anything that would make him look ridiculous and otherwise accepted their infatuation with each other as a *fait accompli*.

What Mrs. Taylor got from Mill was not only adulation; she was a very intelligent and attractive woman and might have had any amount of adulation had she sought it. What she valued was the intellectual respect she received. All commentators have thought Mill gave her a great deal more than her due;[3] the dedication of *On Liberty* gives a fair sample of Mill's estimate of her abilities and simultaneously suggests some grounds for scepticism about that estimate. A woman of no matter

1. See my "John Stuart Mill and Bureaucracy," in G. Sutherland, ed., *The Growth of Nineteenth Century Government* (London, 1973).
2. For Mill's references to "despotism" see pp. 48–49.
3. One qualification should be made: recent writers on Mill's feminism have thought well of Harriet Taylor; see, for example, pp. 345–47.

how much native wit could not, without much more education than Harriet Taylor ever received, have been a match for Mill, let alone seen so much further than he. It hardly needs saying that nobody other than Mill has thought that she was superior in poetic sensibility to Carlyle and intellectually his own superior in all but matters of technical detail. Still, she gave him many valuable things, and we may be as grateful as Mill that she did. On the equality of women's rights with those of men, she was a simpler, bolder, and more unequivocal liberal than he. She, not he, took the lead in arguing that whatever men were entitled to do, women should be entitled to do too. Moreover, she was quicker than he to accept that women would want to do more of what had formerly been "men's work" than had hitherto been supposed. Mill too readily dropped into thinking that men were "naturally" inclined to engage in the world's work, in warfare, and in the hurly-burly of politics, while women would "beautify" life. He also, as a good classical economist, feared that encouraging women to go out to work would simply lower the wages of the laboring poor. The classical theory of wages held that wages were determined by the numbers of workers looking for work; if we double the number of workers we halve the average wage. Harriet Taylor's energy and perhaps also her economic ignorance—a happy ignorance, since the classical theory of wages was wrong—put a stop to such arguments.

Where her influence was more equivocal was in strengthening Mill's suspicious view of his own society. Once Harriet and he had become deeply committed to one another, they ceased to go out into society. They felt surrounded by a hostile, overrespectable society and returned a joint condemnation of society's narrow-mindedness. It is worth emphasizing that what they deplored was a *middle-class* society; Mill makes much of the connection between a tyrannical public opinion and the rise of democratic government, but he was not thinking of the dangers that would be posed by the working class when it got the vote. Mill was frightened by the conformism of a middle-class society, not by the dangers of proletarian insurrection. Since many of his anxieties about a democratic society had been provoked by Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* or had been reinforced by that work, it is worth noticing that the epitome of middle-class society was the United States; he saw Britain as a version of America and had no such fears about France or Italy—though he deplored their illiberal governments as much as one might expect. What made the United States "middle-class" was not that the country was full of the sort of *bons bourgeois* that Balzac and other nineteenth-century French novelists described—for there were few or no such people to be found there. It was rather that outside the black and American Indian population, there was no deep, persistent, and inescapable poverty. Everyone could aspire to comfort and a reasonable degree of economic security. The question was whether people whose economic needs had been taken care of, and whose political rights were

secure, would use this foundation to launch into a new and lively civilization or would settle for a boring, sheeplike uniformity. Mill feared the latter. In exciting these fears, Harriet Taylor and their illicit relationship played a considerable role. *On Liberty* was conceived as a memorial to her, for she died in 1858, after a mere seven years of married life with Mill, and the book came out in the following year, dedicated to her memory. It would be a vulgar but not wholly inaccurate description of *On Liberty* to say that the substance of the fears it expresses was provided by Tocqueville, but the intensity of the emotion that went into that expression was provided by Harriet Mill.

## Parliament

Although Mill maintained that the spring of his life was broken by Harriet's death, he was in fact a liberated man. In part, this was simply because the two of them had spent most of the previous decade contemplating their own extinction. She and Mill were consumptive, and all too likely Mill infected her, he having been infected by his own father many years before. But he recovered from the illness while she died. Freed after her death of the anxieties caused by their unorthodox relationship, Mill once more went into society, rediscovered old friendships, and took a vigorous role in public controversy. Not only did he write a great deal in the fifteen years remaining to him, he entered Parliament in 1865 as a Liberal MP, and although he lost his seat in the election of 1868, he was a surprisingly effective speaker and controversialist. Under his leadership, the advocates of votes for women came closer during the debates over the Reform Act of 1867 to passing the necessary legislation than anyone for fifty years thereafter. Only in 1918 did a British government finally see reason, bite the bullet, and give women the vote. Inside Parliament and out, Mill spoke in favor of female suffrage, a large measure of independence for Ireland, substantial reform of the system of land tenure, the need for an international system of security to replace war as presently instituted, and much else on the radical liberal agenda.

When Mill died on May 6, 1873, he was acknowledged as the outstanding intellectual figure of the day. Hyppolyte Taine observed that the British were an unphilosophical people but admitted that "they do have John Stuart Mill." He was not universally liked or admired, however. American critics disliked his free trade economics, feared his agnosticism in matters of religion, and found him glacially cold—"an intellectual iceberg," said Charles Eliot Norton. His British critics thought he was too prim, too aggressively liberal, unfeelingly intellectual, and out of touch with the coarse common sense of "the man on the Clapham omnibus." It was not only robust conservatives like James

Fitzjames Stephen who thought Mill's liberalism was foolish in itself and at odds with the utilitarianism on which Mill claimed to have based it. The liberal Walter Bagehot thought Mill's commitment to an abstract and high-principled liberalism reflected a misunderstanding of the real liberalism embedded in the English political system. Bagehot suggested that Mill was too readily carried away by his hatred of conservative stupidity; when he was not confronted by conservatives, he was judicious, balanced, calm, and cautious, but when they appeared in his sights a red veil came across his eyes, and the Voltairean desire to *écraser l'infame* overcame him.[4] But nobody doubted that Mill was the patron saint of advanced liberalism, and that is what he has remained for the past century and a quarter. His political reputation, as distinct from his narrowly philosophical reputation, has risen and fallen with that of the liberalism he stood for.

The *Autobiography* was an account of "an unusual education" and a history of Mill's ideas. Before I summarize the argument of the essays printed here, I should outline four elements in that history. The first concerns Mill's reaction against Bentham and against what he saw as the Benthamite spirit. Mill never doubted that Bentham's analytical approach to legal and political reform was an essential weapon in the progressive armory, but he thought Bentham's blindness to the deepest springs of human well-being made him almost comically unsuited to offer advice to a society that suffered from the moral and spiritual uncertainties of early-nineteenth-century British society. In the essay "Bentham," which he published in 1838,[5] Mill gave a considered judgment on its subject. It was harsh, but not dismissive. Bentham was a "one-eyed" thinker; his gaze was penetrating but narrow. What he saw, he saw clearly, but what he did not see clearly he did not see at all. The most damning indictment against Bentham came when Mill discussed Bentham's attempt to classify human action and its motivation in his "Table of the Springs of Action." It was defective because it omitted the aesthetic dimension of life, not only in the usual sense of a concern for beauty but in the more complex sense of an individual's concern for the balance, harmony, consistency, and coherence of her or his existence; it omitted the passion of honor that would lead someone to sacrifice his or her life before violating a promise; it omitted the spirit of perfection that leads us to pursue excellence for its own sake. Finding room for all these things is one purpose of the essay *On Liberty*.

Bentham's democratic inclinations attracted censure too. In the spirit of *On Liberty*, Mill deplores the way Bentham's politics allows the

4. It is in Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* that the famous phrase about the (British) Conservatives being the "stupid party" first appears. Mill in fact described the Conservatives as "being by the law of their being the stupidest party"; it is a moot point whether Conservatives should take comfort that other parties are presumably stupid as well or take umbrage as being described as stupider than the rest (*CW*, vol. 19, 452n).
5. *London and Westminster Review*, Aug. 1838 (*CW*, vol. 10, 75–115).

numerical majority of a society to dictate its character in all respects. Mill was a radical who believed that in some way the majority must have the last word on who was to govern society and on the acceptability of legislation and regulation. But it was very much the *last* word to which it was entitled; the majority should not have every word. Mill invoked a thought that also occurs in "Coleridge," the essay that he wrote as a companion piece to the essay on Bentham.[6] Far from assuming that "the people" was entitled to govern as it chose, we must ask how it ought to choose; that is, we must ask, "to what authority is it good for the people that they should submit?" This question is more in the mood of "The Spirit of the Age" than in that of *On Liberty*. For in the latter essay, Mill seems to assume that society possesses rather too much authority over the individual and is looking for ways to reduce it; in the earlier essay, he thought that authority in general had decayed to nearly nothing. He shared Carlyle's sense that what was missing in British life was an authoritative sense of what held society together, a sense on which political authority could draw, and in the absence of which political leadership was doomed to be ineffective. It is worth remembering how far the late 1820s and early 1830s were years of public and political turmoil as well as of turmoil in Mill's bosom. Demands for political reform and economic relief were loud—demands that Catholics and Dissenters should be relieved of the various disabilities they still suffered; demands for the removal of agricultural tariffs that raised the price of food and threatened starvation to the poor; and demands for the extension of the suffrage, shorter parliaments, the ballot, and an end to rotten boroughs. Catholic Emancipation passed in 1829 in an atmosphere of near revolution, and the Reform Act of 1832 in an even more violent atmosphere. In such a climate, Mill's sense that *authority* rather than individuality was the subject at hand was not implausible. By the time he wrote *On Liberty*, he had a more nuanced view.

What Mill acquired from the various influences that he invoked to balance Bentham was a historical and sociological approach to the problem of authority and individuality. Although his first reaction against Bentham suggested that he might abandon his liberal allegiances altogether, this was a passing mood. The impact of the St.-Simonian missionaries and of Auguste Comte, who coined the word *sociology*—described by Mill as a "convenient barbarism" for its mixing of Latin and Greek roots—was less than that of Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville's account of the American experiment in liberty and equality was the occasion for two of Mill's very best essays.[7] More to the

6. *London and Westminster Review*, Mar. 1840 (*CW*, vol. 10, 117–63).
7. "Tocqueville on Democracy in America (vol. I)," *London Review*, 1835 (*CW*, vol. 18, 47–90), and "Tocqueville on Democracy in America (vol. II)," *Edinburgh Review*, 1840 (*CW*, vol. 18, 153–204).

point, Tocqueville taught Mill to understand what it was that he feared about the nature of a mass society: the subtle and insidious threats to individuality that hid behind an apparently rampant individualism.

Second, then, it fell to Mill to explain in *A System of Logic* how there might be a social science that took proper account of both individuality and the workings of society and how liberalism might see society as a field for rational reform based on the findings of social science without slighting the insights of conservatives like Coleridge. This is not the place to do more than say dogmatically that *A System of Logic* occupies the central place in Mill's intellectual career. Its purpose was to show how there was room for liberal reform and how individual liberty was consistent with sufficient predictability in social life for the purposes of the scientific reformer. Thus it was essential for Mill to subvert what he denounced as

> The notion that truths external to the mind may be known by intuition or consciousness, independent of observation and experience, is, I am persuaded, in these times, the great intellectual supports of false doctrines and bad institutions. By the aid of this theory, every inveterate belief and every intense feeling, of which the origin is not remembered is enabled to dispense with the obligation of justifying itself by reason, and is erected into its own all-sufficient voucher and justification. There never was an instrument devised for consecrating all deep-seated prejudices.[8]

Social change depended on people coming to hold new views, and this included new views in morality as well as in physical and social science; if the truths of morality were simply "intuited," and if the intuitions so arrived at were, as they were usually said to be, infallible, then change would be impossible. So substantial portions of *A System of Logic* pursue intuitionism into the remote recesses of mathematics and logic, not only to give a rational account of these subject matters but because these were the strongholds of intuitionism; if it could be expelled from these, it could be expelled from ethics and politics. Many readers have wondered at the polemical tone of *A System of Logic*, but Mill's passion is understandable. Both *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* complain that a besetting vice of human beings is to mistake the prejudices of second nature or custom for the deliverances of first nature and to suppose that what they believe firmly enough is certified as true. Intuitionism reinforced that vice; the point, however, was to curb it.

Third, the main works of Mill's middle years formed something like a repository of advanced liberal doctrine. *The Principles of Political Economy* summed up the agreed view of economic theory but carefully detached that theory from any commitment to the merits of capi-

8. CW, vol. 1, 233; cf. 269–70.