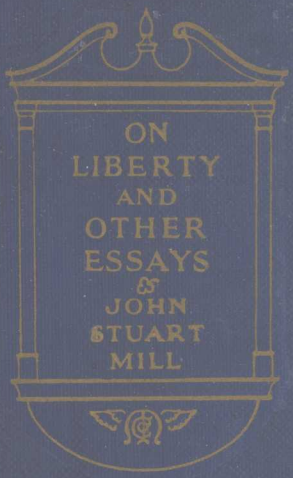
ON
LIBERTY
AND
OTHER
ESSAYS
OF
JOHN
STUART
MILL

On Liberty
And Other Essays

By JOHN STUART MILL

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

The essays included in this volume have their roots in the doctrines and the experience of the school of Philosophic Radicals under whose influence John Stuart Mill was educated. When the American and French Revolutions were pointing to the destruction of feudalism in England, the Philosophic Radicals proposed to replace it by a new social system based on what they considered scientific principles. This system, they believed, would be proof against further revolutions, since it was derived from the universal laws of human nature.

Such was John Mill's faith in his early youth, but he lived to see some of the reforms which the Philosophic Radicals achieved, such as an extension of the suffrage to the English middle classes and the liberation of economic competition from governmental control, become formidable obstacles to the realization of profounder conceptions of social welfare. Thereby he was led to something resembling the evolutionary interpretation of society, wherein institutions are to be adjusted continually to successive stages in the development of the human mind. The preservation of the spirit of questioning and experiment thus became for him of infinitely greater importance than the achievement of any concrete reforms whatsoever. Many of Mill's specific proposals for change seem radical still, and are being championed by present-day liberals as steps toward the humanization of man in society. Others, such as the recognition of race equality and the abandonment of imperialism, though receiving the lip-service of modern democracies, are practically inoperative. But Mill's writings can survive even the time when the world shall have gone far beyond the success of the causes for which they plead, for they contain the quickening spirit of liberty, which abides while the forms that embody it pass.

John Stuart Mill was born in London in 1806, when England was in the midst of her struggle against Napoleon. Abroad, she was the champion of liberty; but at home the traditional liberties of the British subject were in danger of destruction by a high-handed government. The astounding cataclysm of the French Revolution had inspired in the aristocracy "a panic dread of change." George the Third and his Tory ministers were taking every precaution against a popular uprising. The right of assembly, the freedom of speech and of the press were severely restricted; labor unions were outlawed; and the middle classes enriched by the recent industrial revolution were refused adequate representation in the House of Commons, which voted the high taxes with which they were saddled to pay for the war.

Mill's father, James Mill, a journalist critical of the conduct of the war and desirous of domestic reform, was running constant risk of prosecution for libel under conditions which made conviction very likely. His friend Sir Francis Burdett, a Member of Parliament, was imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1810 for trying to get a public airing of the scandalous mismanagement of an expedition to the Low Countries which left thousands of soldiers to waste away with fever on the swampy island of Walcheren. Nevertheless, John Mill was not reared in an atmosphere of despair. For his father was convinced, through a belief that men's characters and opinions were wholly the product of their environment, that the triumph of liberal ideas need not be far distant. Locke and the Empirical school of philosophers assured him that the brain of a new-born babe was a blank tablet, ready to receive all its inscriptions from the outer world. From this he deduced the consequence that it would be possible to enlighten and perfect the human race by controlling the character of its sense impressions through education and penal laws. That this had not been done hitherto, was because education and legislation were dominated

by tyrants and fools. With the race thus perverted, it would be a stupendous undertaking to wrest them from such unworthy hands. Yet meanwhile it did lie in James Mill's power to exhibit to the world an attractive example of the extraordinary results of proper education, by regulating the environment of his eldest son, John.

John Mill was unable to remember when he first studied Greek; his father had begun to tutor him at the age of three. He was protected against "the contagion of vulgar modes of thought and feeling" by a practical segregation from other children than his brothers and sisters. His sole exercise, walking, was usually taken in the company of his father, who used the occasion to ply him with questions about the books he had been reading. As a result of this hot-house forcing, by the age of twelve John had read nearly all the Greek and Latin classics and widely in English literature, knew ancient history minutely, and mathematics to the differential calculus. Then began the second part of his education, a severe training in logic. For it was of the utmost importance that he make correct generalizations from the multitudinous impressions which he had received from his reading, and from the conversation of his father's circle of friends.

That conversation had introduced the boy to opinions most advanced for the time. James Mill and his friends, chief of whom were Jeremy Bentham, a brilliant social philosopher who had been voted a citizen of the French Republic in 1792, Francis Place, a self-educated tailor with a genius for political organization, and David Ricardo, a rich Jewish stock-broker, intended nothing less than an entire change of the social system of England. For diverse reasons, they were united in detesting the aristocracy, which, even after Napoleon was safe in Saint-Helena, refused to do away with the abuses and maladjustments which had been accumulating during fifteen years of French wars. Finding the ruling few opposed to his plans for reforming the barbarous penal laws and codify-

ing and simplifying civil laws whose technicalities often put justice out of the reach of the poor, Bentham resolved to strike at their monopoly of political power. In 1817 he published a "Plan of Parliamentary Reform" which provided for the extension of the suffrage to every adult male who could read, and possibly to every female similarly qualified. Bentham's theories were supported by the practical efforts of Place, who frequently persuaded the shop-keeping majority of the electors of Westminster, a borough with an unusually wide franchise, to elect advanced liberals to Parliament. Having narrowly escaped starvation while engaged in a disastrous strike of leather-breeches makers in 1793, Place was eager to win for the workingman a fighting chance for economic freedom by repealing the laws against labor unions enacted in 1799–1800. The millionaire Ricardo included the right of workingmen to combine in a comprehensive plan to secure entire freedom of foreign and domestic trade for the industrial and commercial capitalists. In his famous "Principles of Political Economy" (1817) he endeavored to prove that the lower and middle classes had common cause against the landowning aristocracy, which kept food at war-time prices by Corn Laws restricting the importation of grain. Hatred of the aristocracy colored even the moral and religious opinions of the group. Heaven was a hereditary monarchy, and the New Testament advised obedience to civil authority even of the most tyrannous sort. The Church of England was a mere branch of the aristocracy, which enslaved the minds of the people through its control of the Universities and most of the schools. For the prevailing ethics, based largely on feudal customs, these iconoclasts wished to substitute a scientific system of morals based on the democratic principle of the greatest good to the greatest number. Young John Mill, whose encyclopaedic education significantly failed to include religious instruction, frequently heard organized Christianity referred to as

"Jugg" (short for Juggernaut), and Jehovah denounced as the greatest of tyrants. But these religious views he was warned not to air outside of his home. The political opinions of his father's associates were sufficiently dangerous to express.

The training in logic quickly achieved its object. At the age of thirteen, John Mill was an original thinker in economics. At fifteen, he found in Bentham's celebrated principle of utility "the keystone which held together the detached and fragmentary parts of (his) knowledge and beliefs." The writings of Bentham and of the French philosophers who had prepared the explosive ideas of the Revolution inspired him to be nothing less than "a reformer of the world." His opportunity to put this reforming zeal into practice was exceptional. For by 1823 public opinion had turned against George the Fourth and his ministers sufficiently to permit Bentham and his followers to come forth as a third or Radical political party in opposition to the Tories and the conservative Whigs. That year John Mill's attempt to distribute a handbill containing birth-control information, designed to improve the economic lot of the working classes, brought him in collision with the London magistrates. But he found a free field for activity in writing for the "Westminster Review," established in 1824 as the official organ of the Radical party. The precocious youth, who had survived the rigors of his education with an exceptionally vigorous mind, was the most frequent contributor to the "Review" during the following three years; attacking the Corn, Game, and Libel Laws, defending a bookseller imprisoned for blasphemy, and propounding radical doctrines generally in politics, economics, and ethics. He threw all his energy into propaganda, and became a "reasoning machine."

When Mill was twenty, outraged nature at length took her revenge. In a moment of fatigue, Mill asked himself if he would be happy if he were to see all his reforms

suddenly accomplished. The prospect of appalling boredom which the imagination of that possibility brought to him revealed the fatal one-sidedness of his education, which had developed intellect almost to the exclusion of emotion, and had neglected the valuable elements in Christianity and in the other institutions opposed by the Radicals. He therefore sought new food for his emotions, and at length found it, quite by accident, in Wordsworth's poetry and in friendship with Mrs. John Taylor, an unhappily married woman who shared his interest in social problems. He looked for valuable ideas in all camps, in Coleridge, Goethe, Comte, Carlyle, De Tocqueville, without fixed opinion of his own save that truth was many-sided.

Eight years passed before Mill's opinions and character became integrated once more. By that time, the political and social situation had greatly changed. Many of the Radical aims were achieved. The Reform Bill of 1832 had given the middle class political predominance; the law was being reformed; Ricardian economics were accepted as national gospel. But these changes brought little satisfaction to Mill. For the middle class threatened to become a greater obstacle to social welfare than the aristocracy. It filled factories with wage-slaves, and opposed the extension of the franchise even to the better educated of the workingmen; it was profoundly jealous of men of conspicuous ability, lest they disturb its complacency with proposals of change in public policy and private morals. The Radical party had become a bulwark of this new conservatism. Bentham and Ricardo were dead, and had not left behind them followers of their stature. James Mill, now nearing his death, failed to practice the toleration he had preached. He was shocked at working-class protests against the institution of private property. "The newspapers," he wrote, "should suppress all knowledge of these rascally meetings, by abstaining from the mention of them." He reprimanded John

sternly for being in love with Mrs. Taylor, "another man's wife." To combat these reactionary tendencies, Mill attempted to revivify radical sentiment through his direction of the "London Review," which in 1836 absorbed the moribund "Westminster." But his efforts to extend the suffrage, to broaden economic views, and to defend a scientific attitude toward morals made little headway in a nation which greeted the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 with a burst of loyalist enthusiasm.

Discouraged, Mill abandoned active politics in 1840, and devoted himself to the education of the nation by means of his writing. In this he was assisted by Mrs. Taylor, who became his wife in 1851. Her death in 1859 saddened his later life. Thereafter he spent the major part of each year close to her grave in Avignon, in the company of her daughter, Miss Helen Taylor, who took her place as Mill's literary advisor and assistant. His chief works, besides those contained in this volume, were: "A System of Logic" (1843), "Principles of Political Economy" (1848), "Utilitarianism" (1861), "An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy" (1865), and an "Autobiography" (1874). The "Logic" was the first thoroughgoing attempt to reconcile the traditional Aristotelian deductive method with the inductive method which had become predominant with the rise of the natural sciences. The "Political Economy," which modified the theories of Ricardo in the direction of increased governmental interference in the distribution of wealth, remains one of the classics in that much disputed science. With the revival of liberal sentiment in England, Mill was elected to Parliament to assist in the passage of the Reform Bill of 1867, which granted the franchise to workingmen. But he was unsuccessful in his efforts to secure its further extension to women, and to provide for the protection of intelligent minorities against the possible tyranny of the enfranchised masses by proportional representation and the plural vote. Death found him in

1873 endeavoring to forestall class struggle by an impartial examination of the rival claims of socialism and a modified system of private property. He left an autobiography which tells the story of his unique education, and of the growth of his mind, "that was always pressing forward, equally ready to learn or to unlearn either from its own thoughts or those of others."

The essays on "Liberty" (1859), "Nature" (1874), and "The Subjection of Women" (1869) reprinted in this volume are intimately bound up with the events of Mill's life. That portion of "Liberty" which treats of freedom of thought and discussion was born of the days in which a professed liberal like Dr. Thomas Arnold of Rugby could remark: "I would give James Mill as much liberty of advocating his opinion as is consistent with a voyage to Botany Bay" (a penal colony in Australia). Mill's further plea for increased liberty of individual action was stimulated by the general social disapproval of his friendship with Mrs. Taylor, and by De Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," which reported great intolerance of individual eccentricity or intellectual superiority in a republic which prided itself on its freedom. Thus he came to find in the pressure of majority opinion, which Bentham had approved as the sanction of the best moral conduct, the arch-foe of superior moral culture. By preventing "experiments of living," it might render impossible the discovery of insights in advance of the narrow and static Christian ethics. And it might reinforce the dangerous influence of the growing industrialism, which threatened to make machines of men. Mill dedicated "Liberty" to his recently deceased wife, who had weighed and discussed every sentence with him. Its appearance in 1859, simultaneously with Darwin's "Origin of Species," marked the beginning of the end of the Victorian compromise. Its immediate influence can be traced in Walter Bagehot's "Physics and Politics," Samuel Butler's "Way of All Flesh," and the speeches

and writings of Charles Bradlaugh, the first professed atheist to be admitted to Parliament. The late Lord Morley, Mill's disciple and personal friend, carried the tradition of his liberalism into the councils of the Liberal Party. It also forms part of the background of the Fabian Socialists, the intellectual leaders of the Labor Party, whose rise has fulfilled Mill's desire for representation in Parliament of all varieties of economic interest.

The permanent influence of "Liberty" will lie in its contribution toward keeping alive the democratic ideal. In the twentieth century government resting upon parliamentary discussion by popularly elected representatives of all shades of opinion has been menaced by advocates of the dictatorship of an economic class. Attempts of established democracies to resist this pressure, as exemplified by the 1925 decision of the United States Supreme Court in the Gitlow case, have threatened freedom of discussion from the other side. Furthermore, in democratic countries there has been a growing disposition toward the enforcement of personal morality by legal enactment, or through intimidation by organized minorities. And the atmosphere of standardization characteristic of industrial societies has favored efforts to pour men into one mould. These tendencies are not without excuse, for Mill underestimated the power of the average man to form rational judgments, and correspondingly underestimated the extent to which each man's conduct is of concern to society. Still, failure to give great weight to Mill's doctrine of the toleration of individual diversity would mean the failure or at least the perversion of the democratic experiment. For democracy stands or falls with the ability of the average citizen to make intelligent decisions in public affairs. So long as this great experiment has its sympathizers, "Liberty" should have attentive readers.

"Nature" was an outgrowth of the desire of the Philosophic Radicals to free morals from the domination of religion. It was not uncommon for educated men of their

day to doubt whether the Old and New Testaments proceeded from or recorded the acts of a perfectly wise and good being. But most who thus denied the divine authorship of the Bible were convinced that the marvellous orderliness of the world revealed by the Newtonian physics gave evidence of a wise and good creator. What distinguished the Benthamite group was their perception of the brutal struggle for existence in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, which made it as difficult to find moral justification for the God of nature as for the God of revelation. Consequently they assumed the agnostic position toward the existence of one good God; a position rare before Darwin. John Mill inherited this attitude from his father's circle, and was reinforced in it by reading, at the age of fifteen, the manuscript of Bentham's "Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind" (published under a pseudonym, in 1822), which attacked those who, like Voltaire, believed a religion of nature, in default of a revelation, necessary for the support of popular morality. As a mature thinker, he found the widespread belief in a natural religion one of the chief obstacles to the development of social science, since it placed the criterion of moral conduct in something extra-human, rather than in social utility. It likewise stood in the way of moral and social progress by encouraging the identification of the customary with the natural, as illustrated in Pope's "Whatever is, is right," and the belief in the sanctity of the untutored instincts of "natural man."

Mill's essay, written to clear the way for social science, is the best example of that strict criticism of terms and keen vision for fallacies which was the fruit of his early training in logic; it employs his father's method on a theme which his father had much at heart. But seldom have reason and perfect organization been accompanied by such warmth of feeling and fineness of moral perception. Although "Nature" was written the year before

the publication of "The Origin of Species," none of its arguments has been rendered obsolete by Darwinian and post-Darwinian biology, which have enormously reinforced its general position. Huxley treated the identical theme in "Evolution and Ethics" (1893), yet Mill's essay, published posthumously in 1874, is more in accord with present-day thought because of the larger scope which it concedes to intelligent human control of external nature, the essentially modern contribution to the solution of the eternal problem of Job. Nowadays, however, the dilemma is not so sharp as that which confronted the Philosophic Radicals. Modernist criticism interprets the Bible as the record of the gradual moral development of a race, and not as an absolute system of morals given once for all. Contemporary deistic philosophers and men of letters have taken up Mill's suggestion of the possible tenability of a theory whereby a finite God works with the aid of man to control a world of recalcitrant matter. But the persistence even among the educated classes of the fallacies Mill exposed shows that the work of "Nature" is not done. And skeptical spirits who reject a finite God will find it an eminently satisfactory exposition of their attitude.

Mill's exposure of the common tendency to confuse the results of custom with the laws of a beneficent and immutable Nature was a necessary groundwork for his essay on "The Subjection of Women." Since the beginning of history, sacred books and man-made laws and philosophies had considered woman the inferior of man intellectually as well as physically, and therefore fit only to follow his guidance and minister to his wants. Until the late eighteenth century, this consensus of opinion was contradicted only by a few theorists like Plato, and by the achievements of a few extraordinary women. But the French Revolution began a general loosening of the bonds of authority of lord over serf, of ruler over subject, of master over slave, of employer over employed, which by

the middle of the nineteenth had left the almost absolute authority of husband over wife and of father over daughter a conspicuous exception to a great European tendency. The analogy of this wide movement toward freedom, and his father's doctrine that differences between individuals were almost wholly products of environment, were Mill's chief philosophic reasons for questioning the justice of female subordination. To these were added the potent personal influence of his wife and his step-daughter, whose intellects he admired in the highest degree, and his observation that the influence of uneducated and therefore timorously conservative wives was one of the chief hindrances to men's espousal of causes involving financial sacrifice or social ostracism. At the request of Miss Taylor, Mill in 1861 gave written form to the opinions concerning women which had been his since he had first read Bentham, and which had been frequently discussed and elaborated in conversations with her and with her mother. But they were not published until 1869, when the extension of the suffrage to workingmen seemed to leave its further extension to women the next logical step in political evolution. Mill's essay makes no extravagant claims for the ability of women, but is a disarming plea for an experimental relaxing of their bonds, that their latent capacities may have a chance to manifest themselves. It adds little in the way of ideas to Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneer work, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," which preceded it by three quarters of a century, but it is infinitely superior in clarity of arrangement and dexterity of argument.

Few social movements have advanced with the celerity of feminism since the publication of Mill's plea. The laws of Mid-Victorian England fixing the status of woman now read like relics of Dark Ages. The "Subjection" preceded by ten years Meredith's withering analysis of masculine pretension in "The Egoist" and Nora's portentous slamming of the door of "A Doll's House." Yet

since 1918 women have voted throughout the English-speaking world. In 1924, the Church of England dropped from the marriage service the "obey" which had long been tacitly disregarded; the relaxation of the rigid British divorce laws seems imminent. In the United States the advance has been still faster, though even here woman's struggle for equality of economic opportunity with man has yet to be successful. But even if all its ends are accomplished, "The Subjection of Women" will still be read as a remarkably prophetic social document, as well as a masterpiece of propaganda.

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