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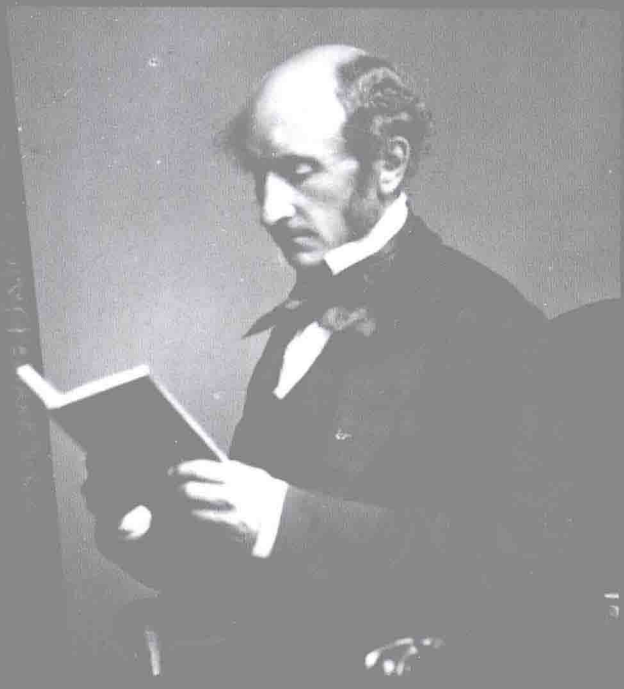
A Companion to Mill



Edited by

CHRISTOPHER MACLEOD and
DALE E. MILLER

WILEY Blackwell

A Companion to Mill

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Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller

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Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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A Companion to Mill

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Donald "D.G." Brown, who sadly passed away just as it was going to press.

Notes on Contributors

Terence Ball is Emeritus Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Arizona State University, to which he moved in 1998 after a long career at the University of Minnesota. He has held visiting appointments at Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of California, San Diego. He is the author of several books, including *Transforming Political Discourse: Political Theory and Critical Conceptual History* (1988), *Reappraising Political Theory: Revisionist Studies in the History of Political Thought* (1995), and a mystery novel, *Rousseau's Ghost* (1998). He is coeditor (with Richard Bellamy) of *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* and for the Cambridge Texts series has edited *James Mill: Political Writings* (1992), *The Federalist* (2003), *Abraham Lincoln: Political Writings and Speeches* (2013), and (with Joyce Appleby) *Thomas Jefferson: Political Writings* (1999).

David O. Brink is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, San Diego. His research interests are in ethical theory, history of ethics, moral psychology, and jurisprudence. He is author of *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge 1989), *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in the Philosophy of T.H. Green* (Oxford 2003), and *Mill's Progressive Principles* (Oxford 2013).

D.G. Brown who sadly passed away just as this volume went to press, was Professor Emeritus at the University of British Columbia. He was a Fellow of Magdalen College Oxford 1952–1955, and taught the Philosophy Department in the University British Columbia 1955–1985. His last papers on Mill include "Mill's Moral Theory: Ongoing Revisionism" (*Politics, Philosophy and Economics, 2010*), and "Mill on the Harm in Not Voting" (*Utilitas, 2010*).

Nicholas Capaldi is Legendre-Soule Distinguished Chair in Business Ethics at Loyola University New Orleans. Among his numerous publications are two books on David Hume and the Cambridge University Press intellectual biography *John Stuart Mill*.

Samuel Clark is Lecturer in Philosophy at Lancaster University, UK. He works on the nature, conditions, and ethical significance of human well-being, and on the form and value of various kinds of literary text – utopias, dialogues, autobiographies – which investigate these issues. Within these broad concerns, he has written on anarchist utopianism, on John Stuart Mill, on the roles of pleasure in good lives, on friendship and comradeship in the lives of soldiers, on David Hume, and on work and human flourishing. He has published a book, *Living Without Domination*, and articles in journals including *Res Publica*, *Philosophy*, *Inquiry*, *Ratio*, *Hume Studies*, and *The Journal of Applied Philosophy*. He is currently writing a book about autobiography and well-being.

Aaron D. Cobb is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Auburn University at Montgomery. His research focuses primarily on nineteenth-century British philosophy of science and he has published journal articles on John F.W. Herschel, William Whewell, John Stuart Mill, and Michael Faraday.

Wendy Donner is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. She is the author of two books on John Stuart Mill – *Mill* (with Richard Fumerton, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and *The Liberal Self* (Cornell, 1991). She has also published many articles on Mill, environmental ethics, feminist ethics, and Buddhist ethics.

Robert Devigne is Professor of Political Science at Tufts University. He is the author of *Reforming Liberalism: J.S. Mill's Use of Ancient, Religious, Romantic and Liberal Moralities* (2006) and *Recasting Conservatism: Oakeshott, Strauss, and the Response to Postmodernism* (1994), both published by Yale University Press.

Ben Eggleston is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kansas. He is a coeditor, with Dale E. Miller, of *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), and a coeditor, with Dale E. Miller and David Weinstein, of *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Graham Finlay is a lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin. Besides articles on Mill and education, he has published articles on Mill and power, toleration and empire. Other research interests include migration and human rights.

Guy Fletcher is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. He is interested in metaethics and ethics, and their history, and political philosophy.

Richard Fumerton received his B.A. from the University of Toronto in 1971, his Ph.D. from Brown University in 1974, and is currently the F. Wendell Miller Professor of Philosophy at the University of Iowa. His research has focused mainly in epistemology, but he has also published books and articles on metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, value theory, and philosophy of law. He is the author of *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception* (1985), *Reason and Morality: A Defense of the Egocentric Perspective* (1990), *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (1996), *Realism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth* (2002), *Epistemology* (2006), *Mill*, co-authored with Wendy Donner (2009), and *Knowledge, Thought and The Case for Dualism* (2013).

Gerald Gaus is the James E. Rogers Professor of Philosophy at the University of Arizona, where he directs the program in Philosophy, Politics, Economics & Law. He is the author of a number of books, most recently *The Order of Public Reason*, published by Cambridge in 2011; with Piers Norris Tuner, he is co-editor of the forthcoming *History of Public Reason in Political Philosophy* (Routledge). His most recent book, the *Tyranny of the Ideal: Justice in a Diverse Society*, is forthcoming from Princeton University Press.

David Godden received his Ph.D from McMaster University in 2004. He is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Michigan State University, researching in epistemology and argumentation. His previous work on Mill includes "Psychologism in the logic of John

Stuart Mill" in *History and Philosophy of Logic* (2005), and "Mill's *System of Logic*" in W.M. Mander's *Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* (2014).

Vincent Guillin is currently Associate Professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal, where he teaches the history and philosophy of the human sciences and the history of modern philosophy. His publications focus on John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte, the history of nineteenth-century moral sciences. Recently, his research interests have centered on the French reception of John Stuart Mill and the history and philosophy of experimental social engineering.

Don A. Habibi is professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He specializes in social and political philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of law.

Daniel Jacobson is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan. He works on a range of topics in ethics, moral psychology, aesthetics, and the moral and political philosophy of J.S. Mill. His essay, "Utilitarianism Without Consequentialism: The Case of John Stuart Mill" was chosen by The Philosophers' Annual as one of the ten best philosophy articles published in 2008. He has published extensively on issues concerning sentimentalism, the relation between moral and aesthetic value, the philosophy of emotion, and freedom of speech.

Bruce Kinzer is Professor of History at Kenyon College (Ohio). Most of his scholarship has focused on J.S. Mill. He is the author of *J.S. Mill Revisited: Biographical and Political Explorations* (2007), *England's Disgrace? J.S. Mill and the Irish Question* (2001), and co-author, with Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson, of *A Moralist In and Out of Parliament: John Stuart Mill at Westminster, 1865-1868* (1992). He joined John M. Robson in co-editing Mill's *Public and Parliamentary Speeches*, volumes 28–9 of Mill's *Collected Works* (1988). Apart from his contributions to Mill Studies, Kinzer has worked on various aspects of Victorian politics, editing *The Gladstonian Turn of Mind: Essays Presented to J.B. Conacher* (1985), and writing *The Ballot Question in Nineteenth-Century English Politics* (1982).

Frederick Kroon is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Auckland. His main research areas are formal and philosophical logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, and metaphysics, and he has authored papers in these and other areas for a range of journals, including the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, The Philosophical Review, The Journal of Philosophy, Ethics*, and *Noûs*. His current research is mainly focused on the theory of reference and fictionalism. He is on the editorial board of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* and is a subject editor for Twentieth-Century Philosophy for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Antis Loizides teaches at the Department of Social and Political Science, University of Cyprus. Loizides' research interests include classical reception and the history of political thought, with a special interest in British utilitarianism and the philosophy of John Stuart Mill and James Mill. He has published articles in *Modern Intellectual History, British Journal for the History of Philosophy, History of European Ideas*. He is the author of *John Stuart Mill's Platonic Heritage: Happiness through Character* (Lexington Books, 2013) and editor of *Mill's A System of Logic: Critical Appraisals* (Routledge, 2014). Loizides also

coedited (with K.N. Demetriou) *John Stuart Mill: A British Socrates* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Scientific Statesmanship, Governance and the History of Political Philosophy* (Routledge, 2015).

Christopher Macleod is Lecturer in Political Philosophy at Lancaster University. He works mainly on the foundations Mill offers for his theory of practical and theoretical reason, and Mill's connections to the Kantian, post-Kantian, and Romantic traditions. Recent articles include "Was Mill a Noncognitivist?" in the *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, "Mill, Intuitions and Normativity" in *Utilitas*, and "Mill's Antirealism" in the *Philosophical Quarterly*.

Lou J. Matz is a Professor of Philosophy and an Assistant Provost at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. He is the editor of the first annotated edition of J.S. Mill's *Three Essays on Religion* (Broadview Press, 2009) and wrote the entry on J.S. Mill in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Philosophers, 1800–2000* (The Gale Group, 2002).

Helen McCabe is a Teaching Fellow in Political Theory at the University of Warwick. Recent research and publications have been on Mill's socialism, his feminism, his ideas concerning distributive justice, his philosophy of persuasion, and his intellectual relationship with Harriet Taylor Mill.

Brian McElwee is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Southampton. His research focuses on the demandingness of morality, supererogation, virtue, consequentialism and the emotions. His publications include "Demandingness Objections in Ethics," Philosophical Quarterly (forthcoming), "The Value of the Virtues," Utilitas (2015), and "The Rights and Wrongs of Consequentialism," Philosophical Studies (2010).

Dale E. Miller is Professor of Philosophy at Old Dominion University. He is the author of *John Stuart Mill: Moral, Social and Political Thought* (2010) and an editor of *Morality, Rules, and Consequences: A Critical Reader* (with Brad Hooker and Elinor Mason, 2000), *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life* (with Ben Eggleston and David Weinstein, 2011), and *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism* (with Ben Eggleston, 2014).

Elijah Millgram is E.E. Ericksen Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah. He has published articles on Mill in *Ethics*, the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, and various edited collections. His most recent books are *The Great Endarkenment* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Hard Truths* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

Peter Niesen is Professor of Political Theory at Hamburg University. Among his recent publications are "Parole, vérité et liberté de Jeremy Bentham à John Stuart Mill," *Archives de Philosophie* (2015), and an edited volume of Bentham's Writings on the French Revolution, *Jeremy Bentham: Unsinn auf Stelzen*, Berlin: Akademie 2013.

Richard V. Reeves is the author of *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic, 2007). He is a Senior Fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC.

Jonathan Riley is Professor of Philosophy and Political Economy, Tulane University, and a founding Editor of the Sage journal *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*. He has published extensively on Mill's philosophy. He has also received several major awards, including Killam, NEH, NHC, and Rockefeller fellowships, and has been a visiting

professor at the University of Chicago, the University of St Andrews, Princeton University and the University of Hamburg. His most recent publications are *Mill's On Liberty* (Routledge, 2015), which is an expanded version of *Mill on Liberty* (Routledge, 1998), and *Mill's Radical Liberalism* (forthcoming, Routledge).

Ben Saunders is Associate Professor in Political Philosophy at the University of Southampton. He is interested in most moral and political philosophy, but his main areas of research are democratic theory, John Stuart Mill, and medical ethics. He is in the early stages of a project on Mill's democratic thought.

William H. Shaw is professor of philosophy at San Jose State. He has been a research fellow or visiting professor at the University of Michigan, the University of Zimbabwe, the Freie Universität Berlin, the U.S. Naval Academy (Annapolis), and the University of Hong Kong. In addition to essays in a variety of professional journals, Bill has edited or coedited six books, including G.E. Moore's *Ethics, Readings in the Philosophy of Law*, and *Social and Personal Ethics*. He is the author of *Marx's Theory of History, Moore on Right and Wrong, Contemporary Ethics: Taking Account of Utilitarianism, Business Ethics*, and (with Vincent Barry) *Moral Issues in Business*. His most recent book is *Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War* (Routledge, 2016).

John Skorupski is Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of St Andrews, and Visiting Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College London. He has worked mainly on epistemology, moral and political philosophy, and their development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among his publications are *John Stuart Mill* (1989), *Why Read Mill Today?* (2006), and *The Domain of Reasons* (2010).

David Stack is Professor of Modern History at the University of Reading, a historian of nineteenth century social thought, and the author of *Queen Victoria's Skull: George Combe and the Mid-Nineteenth Century Mind* (2008). He is currently completing a monongraph on John Stuart Mill and natural science.

C.L. Ten is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, National University of Singapore. He was previously Professor of Philosophy (Personal Chair), Monash University, Australia. He was elected a Fellow of the Humanities Academy in Australia, and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. He is the author of *Mill on Liberty*, and *Crime, Guilt, and Punishment*, as well as several collections of essays and edited books.

Piers Norris Turner is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Ohio State University. His articles on Mill's moral and political philosophy include: "Rules and Right in Mill," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (2015), "Mill and the Liberal Rejection of Legal Moralism," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* (2015), "'Harm' and Mill's Harm Principle," *Ethics* (2014), "The Absolutism Problem in On Liberty," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (2013), and "Authority, Progress, and the 'Assumption of Infallibility' in On Liberty," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (2013).

Georgios Varouxakis is Professor of the History of Political Thought at Queen Mary University of London and Co-Director of the *Centre for the Study of the History of Political Thought*. His work to date has focused mainly on nineteenth-century political thought (British and French) with a particular emphasis on John Stuart Mill. He is the author of

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books such as *Mill on Nationality* (Routledge, 2002), *Victorian Political Thought on France and the French* (Palgrave Macmillan 2002), and *Liberty Abroad: J.S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). He is also the co-editor of the volumes *Utilitarianism and Empire* (with Bart Schultz, Lexington Books, 2005) and *John Stuart Mill – Thought and Influence: The saint of rationalism* (with Paul Kelly, Routledge, 2010).

Henry R. West is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, Macalester College. Before Macalester he taught at MIT and at Spelman College. He has held visiting appointments at the universities of Minnesota, Chicago, and North Carolina. His works on Mill include *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics* (Cambridge, 2004), *The Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism* (Blackwell, 2006), *Mill's* Utilitarianism*: A Reader's Guide* (Continuum, 2007), and numerous articles and reviews. On Mill's "proof," he has previously published "Reconstructing Mill's 'Proof' of the Principle of Utility," *Mind* 81 (1972), 'Mill's "Proof" of the Principle of Utility' in *The Limits of Utilitarianism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1981), and "Mill's 'Proof' of the Principle of Utility" in *The Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism*. He resides with his wife in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Preface

Why another book on Mill? And, more specifically, why another companion volume, given the existence of the excellent 1998 *Cambridge Companion to Mill*, edited by John Skorupski? The questions are fair, but the answers are not hard to find. Mill has indeed already been the subject of many books of late. In just the last ten years – since 2006, which happens to be the year of his bicentenary – more than a dozen new monographs, at least a half-dozen edited collections of new papers, and a new biography have appeared (in addition, of course, to countless articles in academic journals). While much of the scholarly attention has been focused on Mill's moral, social, and political philosophy, as well as his place in the history of political thought, his theoretical philosophy has not been neglected: witness the publication of a significant work on the Mill–Whewell debate in the philosophy of science and an edited collection on the *System of Logic*, not to mention a number of nuanced articles considering Mill's philosophy of language.

Yet the very fact that so much first-rate work has been and continues to be produced about every aspect of Mill's life and thought indicates that interest in him remains both widespread and intense, and this alone constitutes a rationale for another significant contribution to the literature – at least as long as it is of sufficient quality. Moreover, that the literature has grown so much in just the last decade, let alone since the publication of the last companion to Mill, suggests that this is an appropriate juncture for taking stock in a comprehensive fashion both of everything that we have learned and of the state of the debate over the many interpretative questions that remain unsettled. This is what this volume, whose contributors include most of the biographers and interpreters responsible for moving the conversation about Mill forward in recent years, aims to do.

Despite the advances that have been made in our understanding of Mill, there are still very basic disagreements about the nature of his thought. Writing in Skorupski's *Companion*, Alan Ryan pointed out that despite the apparent simplicity of its prose, the nature of Mill's *On Liberty* remains disputed.

> [O]ught we not to know by now whether the essay's main target is the hold of Christianity on the Victorian mind or rather the hold of a monolithic public opinion of whatever kind; whether its intellectual basis lies in utility as Mill claimed or in a covert appeal to natural right; whether the ideal of individual moral and intellectual autonomy is supposed to animate everyone, or only an elite; and so indefinitely on? (Ryan 1998: 497)

Such debate continues between this volume's contributors both here and on the pages of scholarly journals. We still lack consensus on even issues as fundamental as

whether Mill is more profitably seen as a libertarian or a socialist. And if there are still disagreements about the basics of Mill's political philosophy, the same can be said of many other aspects of his works. Whether Mill is better read as advocating a *eudaimonistic* or hedonistic conception of the good is still a live issue, as is how this theory of value relates to his account of morality. Even his orientation towards idealism or naturalism in metaphysics remains contentious.

It is tempting to say that such disputes are inevitable, given Mill's self-declared "many-sidedness" (*Autobiography*, I: 171). His goal to unite the philosophies represented in his own age by Bentham and Coleridge plays out throughout his philosophy as no less than the attempt to reconcile Enlightenment and Romanticism, liberalism and conservatism, scientific explanation and humanistic understanding. This means that Mill's work inevitably pulls in different directions. That is not to say that his philosophy is contradictory, but rather just to point out the obvious – that any satisfactory account of human beings' relationship to the world and to one another must do justice to the complexity of those relationships. Mill's sensitivity to such complexities makes him an invigorating philosophical companion. With the increasing spirit of pluralism within Anglo-American philosophy, Mill's desire to learn from "Germano-Coleridgean" (*Coleridge*, X: 215) insights also provides a useful lesson in how to be open to traditions beyond one's own, while remaining philosophically level-headed.

The chapters in this volume consider many different aspects of Mill's thought. Part I deals with biographical issues, broadly conceived. Mill's life has always been a source of considerable interest. His remarkable education, his breakdown and discovery of poetry, his love-affair with Harriet Taylor and his foray into parliamentary politics all make for absorbing stories – all the more for being set during a period when the British institutions of Church and State were undergoing pivotal change. Behind these episodes, however, lie questions about Mill's relationship to his own intellectual heritage, and the extent to which Mill is a reliable narrator of the meaning and lessons of his own life. Part II of the book offers an account of various important influences on Mill's thought. Providing a complete account is, of course, impossible – Mill's reading was wide, and influence is an amorphous concept. The account here, therefore must be partial, and there are regrettable omissions from the story told here – regrettable all the more because they indicate genuine gaps in our knowledge of Mill's background. We still know little in detail of Mill's debt to the distinctive voices coming from Germany in his own period, the place of the Medievals in his philosophy is not well understood, and (perhaps most surprisingly) his relation to Scottish thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth century has not been fully investigated. Any of these topics, and more besides, could have been usefully included in a companion such as this.

Part III deals with what we have decided to title the "Foundations of Mill's Thought." These include aspects of his theoretical philosophy – though we do not mean to take a stand on the much disputed question of whether Mill's theoretical philosophy is the groundwork, or rather a result of, his moral philosophy. Whatever the case, this aspect of Mill's philosophy is rich and deep, and it is perhaps surprising that it has received so little attention when compared to that of Locke and Hume. Mill's place in the history of philosophy means that he sees clearly the strengths and possibilities of British empiricism – but also its internal tensions. The growth of the physical, biological, and social sciences in his own time made it clear that a new account of humans' knowledge of the

world was necessary – but in the process of attempting to offer such an account, Mill runs into some of the most difficult problems of reconciling the mind seen as a natural object in the world and seen as the condition for our view on that same world. This leads him to struggle with how our minds are formed by our circumstances, the nature of our representations of the world, and the relativity of knowledge – issues which could only start to come clearly into focus in British philosophy after the Kantian turn. This section also deals with Mill's view on issues – aesthetics, history, and religion – which, although not traditionally thought of as theoretical, are closely related to those issues.

Parts IV and V form the core of this volume, dealing with Mill's ethics and social philosophy respectively. It is to these areas of Mill's thought that most scholarly attention has been dedicated in recent years, and much has been learnt. It is now generally accepted that any full understanding of Mill's ethics must place his account of morality within the broader context of his account of "the art of life." Mill, to be sure, has much to say about distinctively moral categories of *right*, *obligation*, and *justice* – but it is an open question as to how these relate to his account of the value of utility, which grounds practical reason as a whole. Mill freely avails himself of notions of spontaneity, virtue, and cultivation – these too inform his theory of how it is best for an individual to live. The question of how to Mill's mind it is best for a community to organize itself and act is equally as complex. It has taken a long time for it to be clearly appreciated how many issues are at stake in Mill's "text-book of a single truth" (*Autobiography*, I: 259). There are many arguments presented in that work and they must be carefully picked apart if we are to properly understand Mill's argument for freedom. We must also see these arguments in the context of Mill worries and hopes for a nation's ability to improve itself and other communities, as given in his lesser known works.

The volume concludes, in Part VI, with a consideration of Mill's relation to later movements in philosophy: to modern liberalism, to modern utilitarianism, and to the Analytic/Continental divide. Mill's influence, of course, continues. Many of the philosophic issues he struggled with remain alive today, and chapters on Mill's relation to various other aspects of twenty-first century philosophy could (and no doubt would) have been chosen for inclusion by other editors. We hope that the perceived gaps in this volume will spur others on to complete the work started here.

Reference

Ryan, A. 1998. "Mill in a Liberal Landscape." In *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, edited by John Skorupski, 497–540. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Note on Citations

All citations to Mill in this volume are taken from the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Toronto University Press, Toronto, 1963–1991, and edited by John M. Robson.

References are to volume and page and, in order to minimize in-text disruption, we have adopted the following abbreviations throughout the volume:

Auguste Comte	*Auguste Comte and Positivism*
Chapters	*Chapters on Socialism*
Considerations	*Considerations on Representative Government*
Early Draft	*Early Draft of the Autobiography*
Examination	*An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*
Inaugural Address	*Inaugural Address to the University of St Andrews*
Liberty	*On Liberty*
Logic	*System of Logic*
Notes on the Analysis	*Notes on the Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*
Principles	*Principles of Political Economy*
Rejected Leaves	*Rejected Leaves of the Autobiography*
Subjection	*Subjection of Women*
Thoughts on Poetry	*Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties*

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