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Preface

John Stuart Mill looms in the central *massif* of nineteenth century thought; one of its highest peaks, gaunt in appearance, cloud-capped, chilly. The outline casts its shadow on lower hills – it is regularly used to take bearings on them – but climbers on its high ridges remain few.

The same could be said of other major nineteenth-century philosophers; we are only slowly beginning to take stock of their legacy, and to locate ourselves, as the heroic phase of twentieth-century philosophy recedes, in relation to it. But it is particularly true, I think in the case of Mill. Though his reputation continues to revive, there is still no accurate revaluation of the most fundamental points in his philosophy. Yet his questions, his answers, and their difficulties are all readily understandable in today's perspective. Not every vast nineteenth-century canvas repays the painstaking work of restoration, but in this case the result is incisive and fresh.

This book traces Mill's arguments, tests their strength and suggests alternatives. Some of it, inevitably, enters into complicated detail, but I have tried to keep the larger picture in view. In the first chapter I sketch out the main themes of Mill's philosophical thought. There is an impressive steadiness and scope in Mill's vision; he tackles very big themes right out in the open, for an audience of intelligent readers; he tries to bring pure philosophy into contact with life and thought.

Anyone who does that runs the dangers of pontificating, spreading himself too thinly, hurrying over difficult issues too quickly. Mill can be absolved of none of these things. And it must be confessed that there is something glacial about the philosopher as public figure. Mill fits into no cosy group, no shared esoteric language – but neither does he cast himself as the romantic outsider, observing human society from the desert or the bush. His chosen role is to educate the serious-minded; his philosophical stance is numbingly comprehensive, lucid and systematic. He magisterially treats of mind, society, politics, economics, culture. If

Bacon wrote philosophy like a Lord Chancellor, Mill all too often writes it like a self-appointed Royal Commission.

The grand manner risks sounding hollow – especially when expressed in plain and sober prose which mercilessly exposes bits of mere blur or filling. Some of Mill's more substantive political writings suffer badly from a lack of the nuance and self-irony which attractive political writing needs. They generate 'horror Victorianorum'. But his more purely philosophical works are saved by their incisiveness and humanity. There is little pot-boiling in them; they are packed with crisp argument. We can learn a great deal from these arguments, but it is from Mill's strategic vision that we have most to learn – expecially about the necessary relations between philosophy, culture and politics.

Mill is very English. The English tradition of the philosopher and practical man of sense, and the English paradox of the conservative radical, go far to explain the strengths and weaknesses of his mind. Like Locke or Butler he values intelligibility above laboriously achieved precision. He is humane and balanced rather than playful and ingenious, incisive and strategic rather than carefully worked-over and exact. Another comparison would be with George Orwell: Mill has the same conservative radicalism, centring on hatred of domination but fear of the atomised human mass, the same liking for honest language, the same wistfully prosaic mind. He liked to lecture his compatriots about the virtues of continental thought, but it was from the island of Albion that he did so.

This is no provincialism: the resources of the English intellectual and moral tradition gave Mill the strength and materials to write earnestly and simply and to encounter continental ideas on equal terms. It was another Englishman, Bishop Butler, who spoke of the 'uniformity of thought and design, which will always be found in the writings of the same person, when he writes with simplicity and in earnest' (Butler 1970:16): that uniformity is found in Mill.

The layout of this book is determined by four of Mill's works: the *System of Logic*, the *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*. Many of Mill's other writings contain philosophical discussions of importance – I refer to some of them when it is relevant to do so. But these are the four texts by which Mill's more purely philosophical reputation is likely to stand or fall. The most obvious omission from this canon is his 'Three Essays on Religion'. I would have liked to have a chapter on Mill on religion – but though the essays contain dispassionate and telling argument, they are not, I think, philosophically creative. They fascinatingly display a major predicament of the Victorian mind, but they do not break new paths in our understanding of what religion is. Nor are they essential to Mill's philosophy in the way that Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are essential to his.

I would also have liked to have a chapter on Mill on democracy. That chapter would have fitted more easily into the plan of this book and the perspective on Mill it tries to present; the good and bad in democracy were as much a part of Mill's philosophical thinking as of Plato's. The difficulty here (apart from sheer exhaustion) was simply the extra length which would have been added to an already long book.

The topics in Mill chosen, and the balance among them, are meant to give a picture of Mill specifically as a philosopher. I have given a lot of space to the *System of Logic*, because it is fundamental in Mill's thought and because there is a desperate lack of up-to-date commentary on it. Mill thought the two works by him which would survive longest were *Liberty* and the *System*. He was not wrong to pick out these two. Understanding Mill's project in the *System of Logic*, its strength and historical standing, must be the basis for any full revaluation of Mill, so I have tried to be comprehensive. I have less to say about Mill's fine analysis of causation than about other topics because this has already been well treated by the late J. L. Mackie. Mackie also analysed Mill's 'eliminative methods of induction' very fully; I have covered these in more detail because they are needed for an overall picture of Mill's view of the 'inductive process'. The *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* is discussed in chapter 7, which extends the basic lines of argument in the previous chapters – I concentrate on the tension between Mill's naturalism, his inductivism and his subjectivist epistemology.

On Mill as a liberal and utilitarian there is now a vast literature, much of it very elaborate, and a lot of it very good. On these topics one can assume at least broad agreement about what Mill actually said. In chapters 8, 9 and 10 I have stressed the distinctive quality of Mill's liberalism – the fact that it is founded on an appeal not to irreducible individual rights but to the general good. To approach liberty and equality in this way places great weight on a substantive view of human nature and a substantive analysis of human ends. In this respect Mill differs markedly from the wanly formalistic and subjectivist strains of liberal philosophy in the present century. His is not a defensive liberalism, desperately eliminating hostages to fortune, or a sleight-of-hand liberalism, trying to conjure political principles out of tautologies. It makes deep assumptions about human beings, their possibilities and their ends. Certainly the assumptions were not fully thought through by Mill – they conflicted at many points with his associationist and hedonistic Benthamite inheritance. That means that Mill leaves his followers with a lot of ground-clearing to do. But I argue that there is no alternative foundation for liberalism; if I am right, then to examine the prospects of rebuilding liberalism on cleared but essentially Millian ground is to ask about the fortunes of liberalism itself.

I have been writing this book (though with many interruptions) for nine years. Intensive study of any great philosopher must be simultaneously humbling and life-enhancing; I have certainly found it to be so with Mill. I have come to appreciate the depth and difficulty of what he did, and have found myself rethinking virtually every topic he touched.

Many friends have helped my thinking and writing. I thank particularly David A. Bell, Dudley Knowles, Stephen Makin, Frank McDermott, Angus Mckay and Pat Shaw, all of whom read various parts of the manuscript, improved by disagreement and sustained by encouragement. My deepest debt is to my friend Flint Schier, who died in May 1988. The ideas about the nineteenth century, about liberalism, naturalism, objectivity, human ends, 'disenchantment' and many other things which enter into or lie behind this book were shaped over the years by innumerable conversations with him. He will never read it in finished form but I like to think that he would have found it to his taste.

Like any other author I have learned from books and articles too numerous to mention or even remember. The notes and bibliography give an indication of some of them at least. I must however take this opportunity of saluting a work which absorbs me every time I read it: Maurice Mandelbaum's *History, Man and Reason*. The few references to it in the notes do not adequately convey how much I owe to it.

Abbreviations

Page references for quotations from Mill refer to the *Collected Works*, published by the University of Toronto Press, Toronto, and Routledge & Kegan Paul, London. Thus (I 2) refers to page 2 of volume I of the *Collected Works*. References to the *System of Logic* give book, chapter and section number thus: i.i.1. When I refer to other works I sometimes give their title where it seems appropriate to do so. In the case of *Utilitarianism* and *Liberty* – because of the number of editions in which they are available – I give chapter and paragraph number. 'U' refers to *Utilitarianism*, L to *Liberty*. Thus 'UII5' refers to chapter II, paragraph 5 of *Utilitarianism*. The reference is completed by the number of the relevant volume of the *Collected Works* and the number of the page of the volume on which the passage appears. Cross-references within the book are by chapter and section number in arabic numerals.

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The Millian Philosophy

> Coleridge's sayings about half-truths; and Goethe's device, 'many-sidedness,' was one which I would most willingly, at this period, have taken for mine. . . . (*Autobiography* I 171)

1 Philosophy and its past

One's interest in a philosopher of the past may be mainly philosophical or mainly historical, but the two kinds of interest cannot be divorced. To understand the historical origins and consequences of philosophical ideas one must understand the ideas. And though the history of philosophy is a living part of philosophy, it can contribute to it – by placing present reflection in historical parameters, bringing home its historicity – only as serious history.

Tracing the story of a philosophical outlook is seeing how philosophy interacts with those parameters – responding to its own necessities, generating new questions, slowly shifting the parameters. Some past philosophies cease to be options for us. Others remain as earlier castings of traditions which are still in play. Wherever there is philosophical thought of distinction there is something to learn. The first case at the least gives us a view of ourselves from a diverging path. In the latter we take stock in another way. We get a benchmark against which to measure current philosophical assumptions, and an improved sense of what is transient in them and what is more likely to endure.

The reasons for studying Mill's philosophy are of the second kind. He is sufficiently distant to be seen historically, but he speaks in familiar accents. Mill's positions are live positions in current philosophical thought. In fact they have not been more so at any time this century, or even since his death. Philosophy has moved, across the whole range from logic and metaphysics to ethics and politics, towards a state of debate which makes Mill easier to appreciate than at any time in the last hundred years.

This striking fact is in the first place a matter of Mill's particular interests. His range is wide, and his subjects overlap very largely with topics – be it the analysis of language, the justification of deduction, the nature of scientific reasoning, the epistemology of arithmetic and geometry, the nature of human well-being or the foundations of political liberty – which are at the centre of discussion today. On all of them Mill's attitudes are challenging and fresh; his treatment of any one of them repays study.

The overlap reflects a number of sea-changes in recent philosophy; but in particular it reflects the resurgence of interest in a certain self-consciously liberal and naturalistic perspective. The interest is hostile as well as friendly; however it *is* an interest in that perspective and its consequences and coherence. But that perspective unifies Mill's philosophy: the perspective, in fact, of the enlightenment. Mill's project, in most general terms, was to present the enlightenment perspective in a way which would claim the allegiance and enthusiasm of thinking men and women, and, through them, exercise a social authority for good. He wanted to rethink it in detail and to show how it could incorporate and transcend the criticisms which had been made of it in the age of early nineteenth-century romanticism, the age in which he grew to maturity. Accordingly, the deepest criticisms of Mill are those which argue that he failed in just this respect; that the enlightenment perspective as such is incoherent – in its metaphysics, or its politics, or both. A full appreciation of Mill requires that one recognise what issues are at stake here and why they are significant.

But it takes a certain philosophical setting to see things in this way. In this century English-speaking philosophy at least has by and large had other paths to follow. And the liberal and naturalistic perspective itself fell in esteem though certainly not in underlying influence. It has often seemed threadbare and trite. It has been shrugged off with the more irritation by people who have few genuinely penetrating points to make against it, and correspondingly lack a dialectical sense of its real uncertainties. For the same reason Mill has passed as a philosopher whose ideas – and their inadequacies – we know only too well. But that reputation is itself a historical artefact. Let us trace how it emerged.

When Mill died in 1873 he already seemed to belong to an earlier intellectual epoch, across all the subjects about which he thought – metaphysics and logic, moral and political philosophy, political economy. The last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade or so of this were a period of extraordinary fertility in all those subjects; those who created and experienced its excitement saw Mill's legacy as a citadel which had to be circumvented or destroyed. His was the received position, the too easily achieved synthesis, stultifying in its complacent finality.[1]

When a philosopher acquires the exceptional influence Mill achieved in his lifetime, a trough in his reputation over the next few generations is inevitable. But as philosophy developed in this century Mill's reputation did not revive. Its questions were not Mill's. For one thing, Mill's *System of Logic* preceded the developments in logic and set theory which date back to the 1870s, and transformed twentieth-century ways of philosophising about language, logic and mathematics. But something else went deeper than this. It was the reaction, in that modernist period in which both analytic philosophy and phenomenology emerged, against nineteenth-century modes of thought as such – in philosophy, against 'historicism', 'psychologism', 'evolutionism'; against grand systems which fused philosophical doctrines with substantive conceptions of history, man and reason. Philosophy was now understood as the analysis of logical relations – and that meant (depending on one's affiliation) of pure essences, or of propositions and their internal relations, or of linguistic conventions. It was rigorously pure inquiry, sharply distinguished from questions about what history or psychology in fact constrain us to think.

These distinctions between logical and empirical, factual and evaluative, do of course contain an important truth – the elementary truth expressed in the 'is-ought' distinction. However it was not the elementary truth, but the single-minded modernist obsession with it, that made sympathetic appreciation of nineteenth-century philosophy difficult. In itself, the elementary truth is perfectly consistent with something taken for granted on all sides in the nineteenth century – that in reflecting on what we have reason to believe or do our only ultimate appeal is to what we find ourselves (after critical examination) constrained to think. But the modernist obsession with the purity and autonomy of philosophy and logic transforms the elementary truth into a blinding light: blinding the philosopher to the inescapable psychological or historical context of his inquiry.

An example of a modernist philosopher misreading a nineteenth-century argument in just this way is the 'naturalistic fallacy' of which G. E. Moore accused Mill (see 9.2). When Mill argues that happiness is desirable by appealing to the 'evidence' of what human beings reflectively desire, he points out that he is not putting forward a deductive proof. So he does not sin against the elementary truth. But Moore's preoccupation with the purity of ethical analysis blinds him to the very simple point Mill makes – and to the inescapability of his way of making it: deliberation about ends *can* take no other form than appeal to what we discover by reflective analysis to *be* our categorial ends.

Similar things can be said about Mill's ultra-empiricism about logic and mathematics and about his analysis of the grounds of inductive reasoning. Neither was destined to find a sympathetic audience. Mill's

conception of logic and mathematics clashed with the fervent modernist affirmation of their *a priori* purity, and the attempt to explain that purity in conventionalist or platonist terms. And his grounding of the inductive principle on an appeal to spontaneous forms of reasoning seemed no more than a failure to appreciate Hume's problem of induction.

The reputation of his political philosophy was not in better shape. The most important cause here is undoubtedly liberalism's historic crisis of confidence in the first half of this century. But it is also true, perhaps connectedly, that the intellectual climate was not favourable for political philosophy, not, at least, for the tradition of disciplined reasoning about human nature and its forms of political expression of which Mill is one of the supreme exponents. It was possible to salute him as an eloquent spokesman for liberty, inspiring at least as much by saintly personal example as by rigour of argument. That is the approach taken by Bertrand Russell and by Isaiah Berlin. But to appreciate the true force of Mill's liberalism, one has to accept that political philosophy requires substantive conceptions of human nature, and substantive links with political practice.

The modernist affirmation of philosophical purity allows neither. Philosophical conceptions of human nature are consigned to the realm of undisciplined speculation. And a political philosophy with practical implications disappears down the chasm between is and ought. It is not unconnected that when Russell himself writes on ethics and politics the results are embarrassing in just the respects in which Mill is impressive. Mill thinks soberly and hard about psychological and historical constraints on ethical ideals. He often over-simplifies, often seems over-confident, often blusters about 'science' as a way of whistling in the dark. But Russell sentimentalises. The spirit of Russell's time and milieu gave him little support for anything between rigorously abstract inquiry and fine feelings: but it is on just that missing ground that worthwhile social and political philosophy has to be anchored. Utilitarianism has been accused of lacking a politics and a psychology. Levelled at Mill the accusation would be absurd. It does however have a proper target: it is ethics in the modernist vein that lacks them.

I have said that Millian positions are now more in play than they have been for a very long time. This is fairly obvious in moral and political philosophy, but it is also true in logic and metaphysics, though less obviously so, because Mill's writings on these subjects are much less familiar. Yet it is remarkable how similar in spirit Mill's outlook is to the Quinean naturalism which has become so dominant in recent philosophy. There are fundamental philosophical differences between Mill and Quine, and there also lies between them the technical development of modern logic. But the latter point should not mislead

us. The essence of Mill's analysis of language, and his empiricist view of logic and mathematics, can be stated as well in modern logical as in syllogistic terms. In fact the language of modern logic makes it much easier to state it with flexibility and precision. Philosophically, on the other hand, exactly the same questions about the coherence of the naturalistic stance arise now as arose then. The central question remains the tenability of naturalism in the face of Kantian critique.

The chapters which follow this one examine Mill's philosophical doctrines in detail; it is important however – more with Mill than with many other philosophers – not to lose sight of the wood for the trees. So this introductory chapter sets out some of Mill's larger themes and problems, and estimates the present significance of his ideas. Of course a broad sketch of any philosophical position can sink in fully only at the end of detailed analysis, and not in advance of it, but it is still useful to have a rough map in hand.

2 *Logic and metaphysics*

The root of Mill's philosophical thought is thoroughgoing naturalism. Human beings are entirely a part of the natural causal order studied by science. They are causal systems within that larger causal order. In this fundamental premise Mill was always a child of the enlightenment.

But the first decades of the nineteenth century saw a sharp reaction against enlightenment ideas and values. Philosophically, that reaction was most fully worked through by German philosophers, and it came to Mill through his 'Germano-Coleridgean' friends.[2] Its starting point was precisely the rejection of naturalism. This was the 'Copernican revolution' of which Kant spoke in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – from which idealism in its distinctive nineteenth-century meaning grew. The antagonism between naturalism and various forms of post-Kantian idealism became the central philosophical debate of the nineteenth century. It is the constant background of Mill's philosophical writings.

The fully naturalistic view of human thought has an implication of which both Kant and Mill were intensely aware. Both would have taken the following point as fundamental: if the mind is simply and only a part of nature then no real knowledge of the natural world can be *a priori*. Either all real knowledge is *a posteriori*, grounded in experience, or there is no real knowledge – 'knowledge is impossible'. Any grounds for asserting a proposition that has real content must be empirical grounds. Empiricism is then the thesis that there are such grounds, scepticism, that there are none. The point on which Mill and Kant could have agreed is that naturalism entails either scepticism or empiricism. Where they disagreed, of course, was on the question of which disjunct was forced.