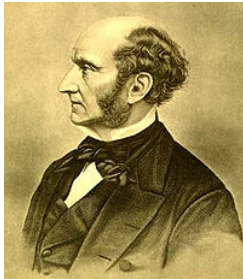


# John Stuart Mill

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## Western Philosophy 19th-century philosophy



John Stuart Mill

**Name:** John Stuart Mill

**Birth:** 20 May 1806 (Pentonville, London,  
England, United Kingdom)

**Death:** 8 May 1873 (Avignon, France)

**School/tradition:** Empiricism, Utilitarianism, Liberalism

**Main interests:** Political philosophy, Ethics, Economics  
Inductive Logic



**Notable ideas:** public/private sphere, hierarchy of pleasures in Utilitarianism, liberalism  
liberal feminism, first system of inductive logic

**Influences:** Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Smith, Ricardo, Tocqueville, James Mill, Saint-Simon (Utopian Socialists)<sup>[1]</sup>

**Influenced:** Many philosophers after him, including John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Bertrand Russell, Karl Popper, Ronald Dworkin, H.L.A. Hart, Peter Singer

**John Stuart Mill** (20 May 1806 – 8 May 1873), British philosopher, political economist, civil servant, and Member of Parliament, was an influential liberal thinker of the 19th century. It can be said that he was an advocate of utilitarianism, the ethical theory of his godfather, Jeremy Bentham, but his conception of it was very different from Bentham's.

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## Biography

John Stuart Mill was born in the Pentonville area of London, United Kingdom, the eldest son of the Scottish philosopher and historian James Mill. John Stuart was educated by his father, with the advice and assistance of Jeremy Bentham and Francis Place. He was given an extremely rigorous, some would say harsh, upbringing, and was deliberately shielded from association with children his own age other than his siblings. His father, a follower of Bentham and an adherent of associationism, had as his explicit aim to create a genius intellect that would carry on the cause of utilitarianism and its implementation after he and Bentham were dead.

Mill was a notably precocious child; at the age of



three he was taught the Greek alphabet and long lists of Greek words with their English equivalents. By the age of eight he had read Aesop's *Fables*, Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the whole of Herodotus, and was acquainted with Lucian, Diogenes Laërtius, Isocrates and six dialogues of Plato (see his Autobiography). He had also read a great deal of history in English and had been taught arithmetic.

A contemporary record of Mill's studies from eight to thirteen is published in Bain's sketch of his life. It suggests that his autobiography rather understates the amount of work done. At the age of eight he began learning Latin, Euclid, and algebra, and was appointed schoolmaster to the younger children of the family. His main reading was still history, but he went through all the Latin and Greek authors commonly read in the schools and universities at the time. He was not taught to compose either in Latin or in Greek, and he was never an exact scholar; it was for the subject matter that he was required to read, and by the age of ten he could read Plato and Demosthenes with ease. His father's *History of India* was published in 1818; immediately thereafter, about the age of twelve, Mill began a thorough study of the scholastic logic, at the same time reading



Aristotle's logical treatises in the original language. In the following year he was introduced to political economy and studied Adam Smith and David Ricardo with his father--ultimately completing their classical economic view of factors of production.

This intensive study however had injurious effects on Mill's mental health, and state of mind. At the age of 21 he suffered a nervous breakdown. As explained in chapter V of his *Autobiography*, this was caused by the great physical and mental arduousness of his studies which had suppressed any feelings he might have developed normally in childhood. Nevertheless, this depression eventually began to dissipate, as he began to find solace in the poetry of William Wordsworth. His capacity for emotion resurfaced, Mill remarking that the "cloud gradually drew off".

Mill refused to study at Oxford University or Cambridge University, because he refused to take Anglican orders from the "white devil".<sup>[2]</sup> Instead he followed his father to work for the British East India Company until 1858. Between the years 1865-1868 he served as Lord Rector of the University of St. Andrews, where he gave an inaugural speech on the value of culture.



During the same period, 1865-8, he was an independent Member of Parliament, representing the City and Westminster constituency from 1865 to 1868.<sup>[3]</sup> During his time as an MP, Mill advocated easing the burdens on Ireland, and became the first person in Parliament to call for women to be given the right to vote. Mill became a strong advocate of women's rights and such political and social reforms as proportional representation, labor unions, and farm cooperatives. In 1869, he argued for the right of women to vote. In *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill called for various reforms of Parliament and voting, especially proportional representation, the Single Transferable Vote, and the extension of suffrage. He was godfather to Bertrand Russell.

In 1851, Mill married Harriet Taylor after 21 years of an intimate friendship. Taylor was married when they met, and their relationship was close but chaste during the years before her first husband died. Brilliant in her own right, Taylor was a significant influence on Mill's work and ideas during both friendship and marriage. His relationship with Harriet Taylor reinforced Mill's advocacy of women's rights. He cites her influence



in his final revision of *On Liberty*, which was published shortly after her death, and she appears to be obliquely referenced in *The Subjection of Women*. Taylor died in 1858 after developing severe lung congestion, only seven years into her marriage to Mill.

He died in Avignon, France in 1873, and is buried alongside his wife.

## **Works**

### **Theory of liberty**

Mill's *On Liberty* is one of the founding texts of classical liberalism and one of the most important treatises ever written on the concept of liberty. The book explores the nature and limits of the power that can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. One argument that Mill develops further than any previous philosopher is the harm principle. The harm principle holds that each individual has the right to act as he wants, so long as these actions do not harm others. If the action is self-regarding, that is, if it only directly affects the person undertaking the action, then society has no right to intervene, even if it feels the actor is



harming himself. Mill excuses those who are "incapable of self-government" from this principle, such as young children or those living in "backward states of society". It is important to emphasize that Mill did not consider giving offense to constitute "harm"; an action could not be restricted because it violated the conventions or morals of a given society.

*On Liberty* involves an impassioned defense of free speech. Mill argues that free discourse is a necessary condition for intellectual and social progress. We can never be sure, he contends, that a silenced opinion does not contain some element of the truth. He also argues that allowing people to air false opinions is productive for two reasons. First, individuals are more likely to abandon erroneous beliefs if they are engaged in an open exchange of ideas. Second, by forcing other individuals to re-examine and re-affirm their beliefs in the process of debate, these beliefs are kept from declining into mere dogma. It is not enough for Mill that one simply has an unexamined belief that happens to be true; one must understand why the belief in question is the true one.

Mill's states the harm principle in Chapter 1 of *On Liberty*:



“ The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right...The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. ”

Though this principle seems clear, there are a number of complications. For example, Mill



explicitly states that "harms" may include acts of omission as well as acts of commission. Thus, failing to rescue a drowning child counts as a harmful act, as does failing to pay taxes, or failing to appear as a witness in court. All such harmful omissions may be regulated, according to Mill. By contrast, it does not count as harming someone if — without force or fraud — the affected individual consents to assume the risk: thus one may permissibly offer unsafe employment to others, provided there is no deception involved. (Mill does, however, recognize one limit to consent: society should not permit people to sell themselves into slavery). In these and other cases, it is important to keep in mind that the arguments in *On Liberty* are grounded on the principle of Utility, and not on appeals to natural rights. The question of what counts as a self-regarding action and what actions, whether of omission or commission, constitute harmful actions subject to regulation, continues to exercise interpreters of Mill.

Additionally, Mill demonstrated a deep appreciation for the military, noting in his essay "The Contest In America":

"War is an ugly thing, but not the



“ ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.”

[4]

## Utilitarianism

The canonical statement of Mill's Utilitarianism can be found in *Utilitarianism*. This philosophy has a long tradition, although Mill's account is primarily influenced by Jeremy Bentham, and Mill's father James Mill. Mill's famous formulation of Utilitarianism is known as the "greatest happiness principle." It holds that one must always act so as to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. One of Mill's major contributions to Utilitarianism is his argument for the qualitative separation of



pleasures. Bentham treats all forms of happiness as equal, whereas Mill argues that intellectual and moral pleasures are superior to more physical forms of pleasure. Mill distinguishes between "happiness" and "contentment," claiming that the former is of higher value than the latter, a belief wittily encapsulated in his statement that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

Mill defines the difference between higher and lower forms of happiness on the principle that those who have experienced both tend to prefer one over the other. This is, perhaps, in direct opposition to Bentham's statement that "Pushpin is as good as an Opera," that if a simple child's game like hopscotch causes more pleasure to more people than a night at the opera house, it is more imperative upon a society to devote more resources to propagating hopscotch than running opera houses. Mill's argument is that the 'simple pleasures' tend to be preferred by people who have no experience with high art, and are therefore not in a proper position to judge. For this reason, in his life Mill supported legislation that would have granted extra voting power to university graduates, on the grounds that they were in a better position to judge what would be best for society. It should be noted that in this Mill in no way devalued the



uneducated as people, and he certainly would have advocated sending the poor but talented to universities; it is the education, and not the intrinsic nature, of the educated that Mill believed qualified them to have more influence in government.

Mill furthermore dealt with one of the prime problems associated with utilitarianism, that of *schadenfreude*. Detractors of utilitarianism argued, among other objections, that if enough people hated another person sufficiently that simply reducing the happiness of the object of their hatred would cause them pleasure, it would be incumbent upon a utilitarian society to aid them in harming the individual. Mill argued that, in order to have such an attitude of malice, a citizen would have to value his own pleasure over that of another, and so society is in no way obligated to indulge him, and, to the contrary, is fully permitted to suppress his actions.

The qualitative account of happiness Mill advocates thus sheds light on his account presented in *On Liberty*. As Mill suggests in that text, utility is to be conceived in relation to mankind "as a progressive being," which includes the development and exercise of our rational capacities



as we strive to achieve a "higher mode of existence". Thus the rejection of censorship and paternalism is intended to provide the necessary social conditions for the achievement of knowledge and the greatest ability for the greatest number to develop and exercise their deliberative and rational capacities.

## **Economic philosophy**

Mill's early economic philosophy was one of free markets. However, he accepted interventions in the economy, such as a tax on alcohol, if there were sufficient utilitarian grounds. He also accepted the principle of legislative intervention for the purpose of animal welfare. [2] Mill believed that "equality of taxation" meant "equality of sacrifice" and that progressive taxation penalized those who worked harder and saved more and was therefore "a mild form of robbery".[3]

Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, first published in 1848, was one of the most widely read of all books on economics in the period.[5] As Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had during an earlier period, Mill's *Principles* dominated economics teaching. (In the case of Oxford



University it was the standard text until 1919, probably because the text that replaced it was written by Cambridge's Alfred Marshall).

Later in life, Mill moved to favor more socialist-oriented politics.[4]

## **Logic**

Mill's *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive* went through several revisions and editions. William Whewell's *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837) was a chief influence. The reputation of this work is largely due to his analysis of inductive proof, in contrast to Aristotle's syllogisms, which are deductive. Mill describes the five basic principles of induction which have come to be known as Mill's Methods - the method of agreement, the method of difference, the joint or double method of agreement and difference, the method of residues, and that of concomitant variations. The common feature of these methods, the one real method of scientific inquiry, is that of elimination. All the other methods are thus subordinate to the method of difference. It was also Mill's attempt to postulate a theory of knowledge, in the same vein as John



Locke.

He was also the first to use the term dystopia.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Major publications of John Stuart Mill**

- "Two Letters on the Measure of Value", 1822, *The Traveller*
- "Questions of Population", 1823, *Black Dwarf*
- "War Expenditure", 1824, *Westminster Review*
- "Quarterly Review -- Political Economy", 1825, *Westminster Review*
- "Review of Miss Martineau's Tales", 1830, *Examiner*
- "The Spirit of the Age", 1831, *Examiner*
- "Essay on Bentham" 1838
- *A System of Logic*, 1843
- *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*, 1844
- "Claims of Labour", 1845, *Edinburgh Review*
- *The Principles of Political Economy: with some of their applications to social philosophy*, 1848
- "The Negro Question", 1850, *Fraser's*



*Magazine*

- *Dissertations and Discussions*, 1859.
- *On Liberty*, 1859
- *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform*, 1859.
- *Considerations on Representative Government*, 1860
- "Centralisation", 1862, *Edinburgh Review*
- "The Contest in America", 1862, *Harpers's Magazine*
- *Utilitarianism*, 1863
- *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 1865.
- *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 1865.
- *Inaugural Address at St. Andrews - Rectorial Inaugural Address at the University of St. Andrews*, concerning the value of culture, 1867.
- "Speech In Favor of Capital Punishment", 1868
- *England and Ireland*, 1868.
- "Thornton on Labor and its Claims", 1869, *Fortnightly Review*
- *The Subjection of Women*, 1869
- *Chapters and Speeches on the Irish Land Question*, 1870
- *On Nature*, 1874
- *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*, 1873
- *Three Essays on Religion*, 1874
- "Notes on N.W. Senior's Political



Economy", 1945, *Economica*

## See also

- Liberalism
- Utilitarianism
- Contributions to liberal theory
- Women's suffrage in the United Kingdom

## References

### Inline

1. ^ Friedrich Hayek (1941). "The Counter-Revolution of Science". *Economica* **8** (31): 281-320. DOI:10.2307/2549335.
2. ^ Capaldi, Nicholas. *John Stuart Mill: A Biography*. p.33, Cambridge, 2004, ISBN 0-521-62024-4.
3. ^ Ibid. p.321-322
4. ^ Because of this, his works are a central focus of the ethics and philosophy curriculum at the United States Air Force Academy, focusing on the moral challenges within utilitarianism, in particular. The quote is also mandatory knowledge for Field Training in Air Force ROTC.
5. ^ Ekelund, Robert B., Jr. and Hébert, Robert



F. (1997). *A history of economic theory and method*, 4th. ISBN 1-57766-381-0.

6. ^ John Stuart Mill uses the term dystopia in a parliamentary speech, possibly the first recorded use of the term. Exploring Dystopia, last accessed on 19th March 2006, see also [1]

## General

- Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*, MacMillan (1952).
- David O. Brink, "Mill's Deliberative Utilitarianism," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21 (1992), 67-103.
- Sterling Harwood, "Eleven Objections to Utilitarianism," in Louis P. Pojman, ed., *Moral Philosophy: A Reader* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), and in Sterling Harwood, ed., *Business as Ethical and Business as Usual* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1996), Chapter 7, and in [5]www.sterlingharwood.com.
- Robinson, Dave & Groves, Judy (2003). *Introducing Political Philosophy*. Icon Books. ISBN 1-84046-450-X.
- Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (Routledge Studies in Ethics & Moral Theory), 2003. ISBN



0415220947

- Samuel Hollander, *The Economics of John Stuart Mill* (University of Toronto Press, 1985)
- Mill, John Stuart, *A System of Logic*, University Press of the Pacific, Honolulu, 2002, ISBN 1-4102-0252-6
- Chin Liew Ten, *Mill on Liberty*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, full-text online at [6] Victorianweb.org (National University of Singapore)

## External links

### Mill's works

- **Collected Works of John Stuart Mill** - Definitive Edition in 33 volumes, plus separate titles, on the Online Library of Liberty
- Works by John Stuart Mill at Project Gutenberg
- The Online Books Page lists works on various sites
- Vintage Mill, works in HTML
- Works, readable and downloadable
- Primary and secondary works
- More easily readable versions of *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, and *Three Essays on Religion*



## Secondary works

- John Stuart Mill in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics* on Econlib
- John Stuart Mill in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- John Stuart Mill in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- Mill On Liberty, by C.L. Ten, Clarendon Press, 1980 (full-text online)
- "Utilitarianism as Secondary Ethic" An overview of utilitarianism with summary of its critiques.
- *How far did JS Mill let liberalism down? Did he prefer Socialism to Liberalism?* by David McDonagh
- Mill-fest: The Bicentennial Edition by the blog Catallarchy
- "Organic Conservatism, Administrative Realism, and the Imperialist Ethos in the 'Indian Career' of John Stuart Mill, by Vinay Lal (review of "John Stuart Mill and India" by Lynn Zastoupil, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1994.)

## Further information

- John Stuart Mill. Extensive collection of



links to writings by and about J.S. Mill.

- EpistemeLinks
- The Victorian Web Mill section
- Links to works and resources
- Biography, works and quotes of John Stuart Mill
- Catalogue of Mill's correspondence and papers held at the Archives Division of the London School of Economics. View the Archives Catalogue of the contents of this important holding, which also includes letters of James Mill and Helen Taylor.

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