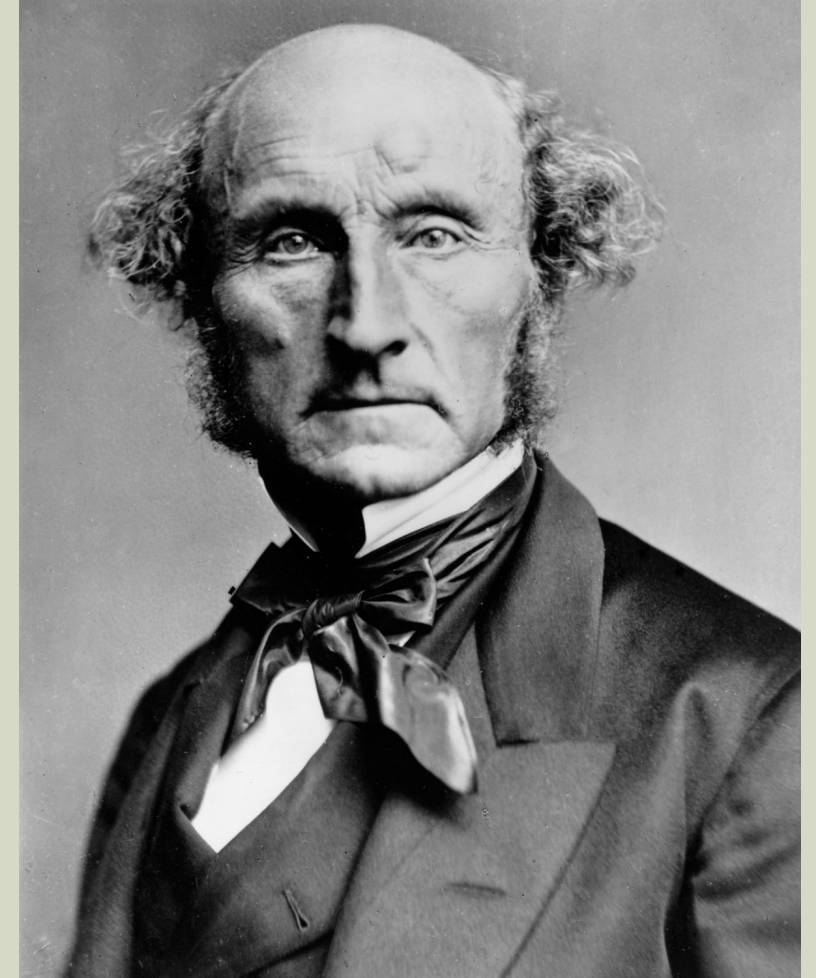


J.S. MILL

Dr JTM MILLER
31ST OCTOBER 2017

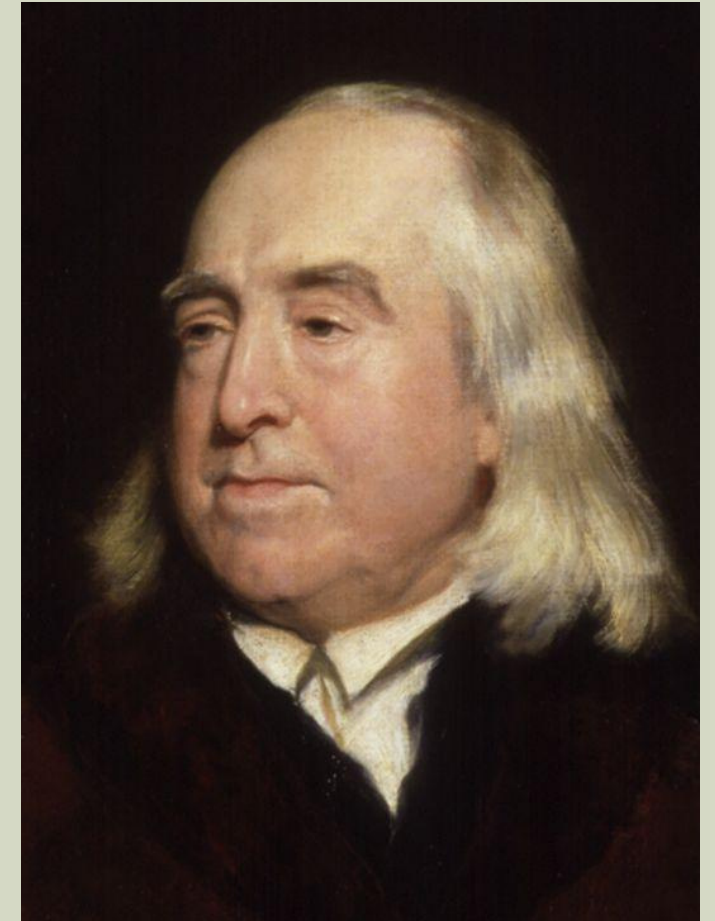
J.S. MILL

- **John Stuart Mill (20 May 1806 – 8 May 1873)**
- **Arguably the most important and influential British philosopher of the 19th century**
- **Both within philosophy, and society more broadly**
- **Three major themes: Naturalism; Utilitarian; and Liberal**
- **Three major influences...**



J.S. MILL

- **1806 – Born in Pentonville, London**
- **His father, James, was close friends with Jeremy Bentham**
- **Together, they devised a plan for John's education – the aim was to make young John Stuart ready to be the leading force in the next generation of radicalism**
- **Fluent in Greek at 3, Latin at 8, knew most classical works, Euclid, and major English and Scottish historians by 12**
- **At 15, was writing major treatise on philosophy, psychology, and the role of government**

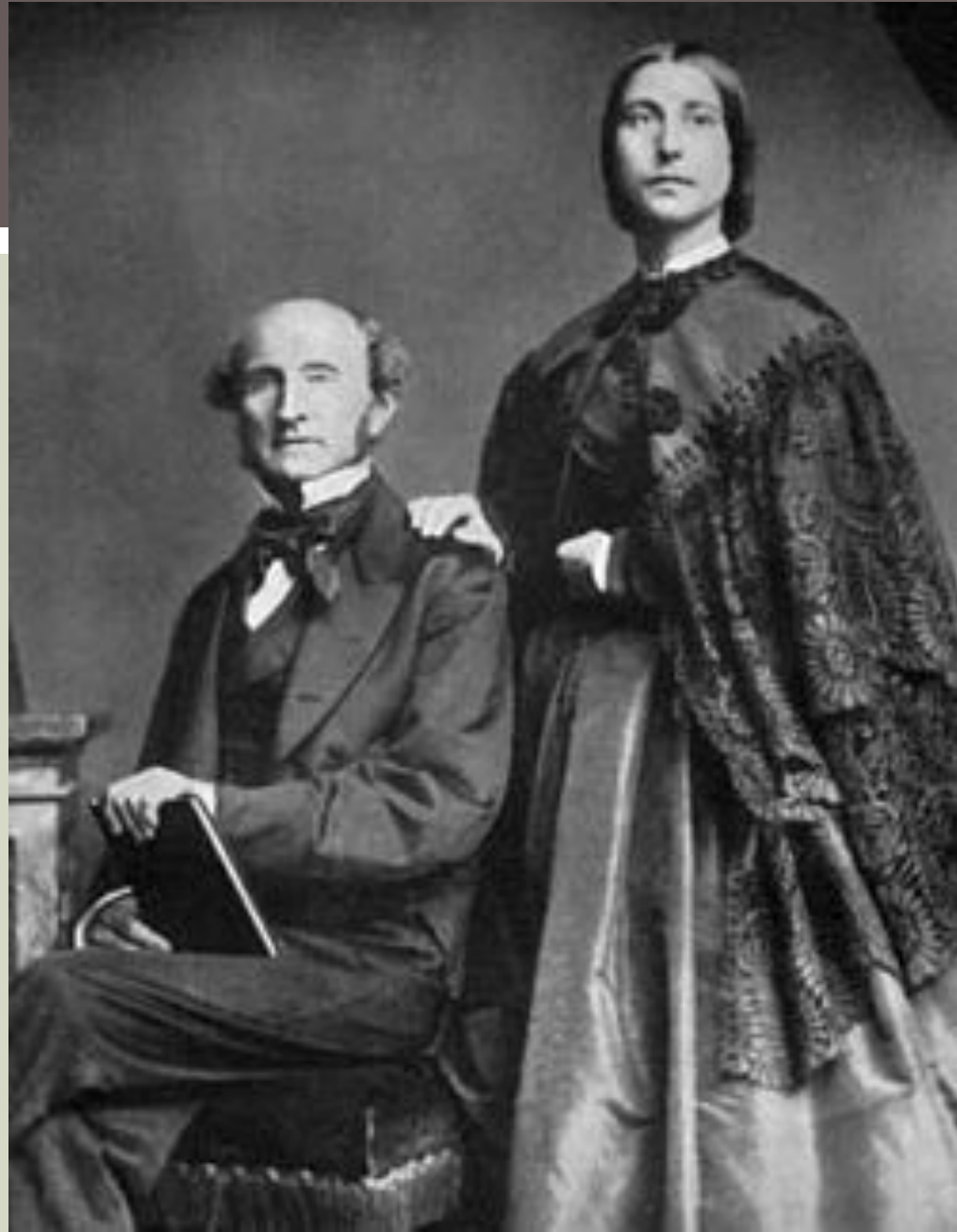


J.S. MILL

- **This crisis had a major effect on Mill**
- **By his late twenties , he came to believe that the Enlightenment philosophy which he had been taught was “one side of the truth” (Autobiography, I: 169)**
- **Began to try to integrate that philosophical training and approach, with lessons he had learned from the Romantic poets – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Goethe**
- **The importance of culture, alongside the enlightenment idea of the need for social reform, began to take root in Mill**

J.S. MILL

- **A second major influence on Mill was meeting Harriet Taylor in his mid-twenties**
- **Taylor and Mill had for a long time an entirely platonic relationship, though one that did cause some controversy due to Mill and Taylor meeting without Taylor's husband present**
- **Later, after the death of Taylor's husband, Taylor and Mill married**
- **Taylor co-authored many works with Mill, and was credited by Mill as a virtual co-author and as being the inspiration behind much more, especially Mill's work on liberty, women's rights, and the rejection of Victorian social standards**



J.S. MILL

- Taylor died in 1858, shortly after Mill had retired from a job at the East India Company, a position he had had since he was 17
- That job had provided income that allowed Mill to focus on philosophical research, but his two most noted books both were written after his retirement
- *On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1861); also important is *System of Logic* (1843)
- Mill would later in 1865 be elected as an MP for Westminster for the Liberal Party
- Mill never held a (non-honorary) university position, nor even attended university

NATURALISM

- **We will mainly focus on Mill's 'practical philosophy', especially in ethics and political philosophy**
- **But it is worth pausing to note that Mill had a developed account in 'theoretical philosophy' – there is a deep connection between these two strands for Mill**
- **Mill was a naturalist – believes that minds and humans are wholly a part of nature with no special place in nature**

NATURALISM

- **Mill was also an empiricist, opposed to a priori knowledge – that is, knowledge arrived at solely through the use of reason**
- **All genuine knowledge about the world, including about morality, must come from observation and experience**

Induction properly so called [...] may [...] be summarily defined as Generalization from Experience. It consists in inferring from some individual instances in which a phenomenon is observed to occur, that it occurs in all instances of a certain class; namely, in all which resemble the former, in what are regarded as the material circumstances.

(System, VII: 306)

FROM THEORETICAL TO PRACTICAL REASON

- Induction underpins theoretical reason; however:

There are not only first principles of Knowledge, but first principles of Conduct. There must be some standard by which to determine the goodness or badness, absolute and comparative, of ends or objects of desire.

And whatever that standard is, there can be but one.

(System, VIII: 951)

FROM THEORETICAL TO PRACTICAL REASON

- This one principle of conduct is perhaps Mill's most famous contribution to philosophy
- His principle of utility

[T]he general principle to which all rules of practice ought to conform, and the test by which they should be tried, is that of conduciveness to the happiness of mankind [...] the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of Teleology

(System, VIII: 951)

UTILITARIANISM AND BENTHAM

- Before we see how Mill applied this principle in his ethical work, it is useful to quickly cover the major influence on this ethical theory
- This comes from Bentham, who had helped design Mill's education...
- Bentham was himself a noted and excellent philosopher and social reformer, and inspired the foundation of University College London
- Where his preserved skeleton still is housed as an auto-icon (although the head has been stolen from rival students from King's College London on a couple of occasions)



UTILITARIANISM AND BENTHAM

- **Founding principle of Bentham's Utilitarianism: The 'Greatest Happiness Principle'**
- **This holds that you should always act in a way to increase the overall aggregate happiness of all sentient beings**
- **For Bentham, all forms of happiness are equal – this is his hedonistic calculus**
- **This provides a guide both for how you should live your life, and what is the *right* action in a given circumstance**

HEDONISTIC CALCULUS

- For Bentham, working out what to do is almost a mathematical task
- Simply add up how many 'units' of pleasure and/or pain that an action might cause, and if it gives more pleasure than pain, it is a good action
- An action with a 'higher score' is a better action than one with a lower score
- Problem: What is what causes me great pleasure is just eating junk food and watching TV all day? Is that then a better thing to do than, say, volunteering for a charity? Or going to an art gallery?

HAPPINESS

- **And note the close similarity to Mill's utility principle, where 'the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of Teleology'**
- **The big difference between Mill and Bentham is that Mill ranked types of happiness**

**It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone
(Utilitarianism, X: 211)**

HAPPINESS

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference [...] that is the more desirable pleasure

If one of the two [pleasures] is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it [...] and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality

(Utilitarianism, X: 211)

HAPPINESS

- Which pleasures are of higher quality?
- Pleasures “of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments” are amongst the higher pleasures (Utilitarianism, X: 211)
- Pleasures gained ‘in activity’ are better than those gained passively
- But in the end, this question is to be answered through the study of experience and via the comparison of the preferences of ‘competent judges’

HAPPINESS

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question

HAPPINESS

- So this is still a form of *hedonism*
- The view that pleasure and the promotion of it, and the prevention of pain is what happiness is
- But, what is the connection to morality? To the 'good'?

MILL'S UTILITARIANISM

- Utilitarianism is normally given in the headline that we should perform actions that lead to the greatest good for the greatest number
- This gives rise to puzzle cases
- E.g. Puzzle trolley cases; the 'utilitarian surgeon'

MILL'S UTILITARIANISM

- But while Mill does think that we should promote happiness
- He does not think that failure to do so means that you have performed a bad action

We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience. [...] [If] it is not a case of moral obligation; we do not blame them, that is, we do not think that they are proper objects of punishment. (Utilitarianism, X: 246)

- You should promote happiness, but you are not obliged to in all circumstances; if you do, it is praiseworthy though

MILL'S UTILITARIANISM

- This means Mill is what is known as a 'minimising utilitarian'
- It would be desirable to maximize happiness for the greatest number, but we are not morally required to do so
- Seems to avoid at least some of the problem cases from before...
- Especially combined with Mill's 'Harm Principle'...

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, AND THE HARM PRINCIPLE

- Another major influence Mill has had on philosophical thinking comes in his work in political philosophy
- Keep in mind the time Mill was writing
- Rise of democracy in the 19th century, and the growing desire for equality replacing the previous dominance of aristocratic power
- But, as we'll see, at its heart still is the idea that how society is organised should be driven by a commitment to producing happiness as the guide to how successful our practices are

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, AND THE HARM PRINCIPLE

- Also remember that Mill's education had been shaped by two significant social reformers
- But Mill did not believe that the changing society would automatically be some utopian idyll
- The job of politics and political philosophy was to ensure against the dangers of the changing societal structures and modernisation

LIBERTY

- Mill was worried that individuals could be controlled against their wishes by societal norms, but also by the 'tyranny of the majority'
- This was a new threat, coming from the growing democratic society that needed to be protected against
- The threat is that people are forced to conform to either direct imposition (say through physical violence) or more subtle influences of expectations on an individual

LIBERTY

- **This threat of conformism is bad as if we conform then we limit our potential happiness**
- **Remember: at the heart of Mill's practical philosophy is that we should promote happiness**
- **Where happiness is to be able to do that which maximises pleasure and limits pain**

LIBERTY

- **Freedom consists in being given space and opportunity to discover and develop ourselves and our own ways of living**

Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing

(Liberty, XVIII: 263)

LIBERTY

- **Central to Mill's thought then are three freedoms:**
- **In thought and speech**
- **In character**
- **In action**

LIBERTY

- **Mill's liberalism has clearly been influential – many today would ascribe to all of Mill's principles**
- **There is no single path for us all – we should all be free to develop ourselves to try to increase our happiness**

HARM PRINCIPLE

- But this is not complete freedom – and it is not libertarianism
- There is still a significant role for the state in Mill's view as the ultimate enforcer of the Harm Principle

the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others

(Liberty, XVIII: 223)

HARM PRINCIPLE

- Note that this only says when it is permissible for us to intervene – not that it is always sensible to...
- For example – we should not intervene in parts of someone's life that only concerns them
- Even if they will be damaged by their actions, we should not intervene because:

[W]ith respect to his own feelings and circumstances, the most ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge immeasurably surpassing those that can be possessed by any one else.

The interference of society to overrule his judgment and purposes in what only regards himself, must be grounded on general presumptions; which may be altogether wrong, and even if right, are as likely as not to be misapplied to individual cases

(Liberty, XVIII: 277)

HARM PRINCIPLE AND ETHICS

- **The harm principle also has a role in Mill's ethical thought**
- **Remember the utilitarian surgeon thought experiment...**
- **Once we take into account the harm principle, we can rule out this scenario**

LIBERTY AND LIBERTARIANISM

- **Mill's political work has been highly influential**
- **But it is important to differentiate Mill's thought from modern-day Libertarianism**
- **Because Mill wants to limit harm to all, the government has a major role in doing just that**
- **Mill's liberalism in fact encourages an interventionist state to secure the protection that the weakest in a society need from the strongest**
- **This is an equality of opportunity – something that comes out most clearly in Mill's philosophical and practical action on women's rights and against slavery**

EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

- Mill believed that a person's character and abilities were a matter of upbringing

[N]o one can safely pronounce that if women's nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men's, and if no artificial bent were attempted to be given to it except that required by the conditions of human society, and given to both sexes alike, there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities that would unfold themselves

(Subjection, XXI: 305)

- Where there are differences between men and women, these only exist due to the stereotypical roles ascribed them

EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

- **And the same applied to slavery:**

This absolutely extreme case of the law of force, condemned by those who can tolerate almost every other form of arbitrary power, and which, of all others, presents features the most revolting to the feeling of all who look at it from an impartial position, was the law of civilized and Christian England within the memory of persons now living: and in one half of Angle-Saxon America three or four years ago, not only did slavery exist, but the slave trade, and the breeding of slaves expressly for it, was a general practice between slave states. Yet not only was there a greater strength of sentiment against it, but, in England at least, a less amount either of feeling or of interest in favour of it, than of any other of the customary abuses of force: for its motive was the love of gain, unmixed and undisguised: and those who profited by it were a very small numerical fraction of the country, while the natural feeling of all who were not personally interested in it, was unmitigated abhorrence

EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

- In this regard, Mill was certainly ahead of his time, and his work *The Subjection of Women* (1869) is often as one of the first male-authored books arguing for gender equality
- For this work, Mill was often mocked as being a 'feminine philosopher'



MISS MILL JOINS THE LADIES.

The Park 41.

EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

- **Mill's case for why we should want and encourage true equality comes back to the utility principle and his notion of happiness**
- **In being limited politically, the denial of voting rights disenfranchised groups of people**
- **Disenfranchisement is bad as it:**
 - **Stops those groups' voices from being heard in parliament**
 - **And denied them part of what is important to have a happy and good life**

EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

[A]n equal right to be heard—to have a share in influencing the affairs of the country—to be consulted, to be spoken to, and to have agreements and considerations turning upon politics addressed to one—tended to elevate and educate the self-respect of the man [...] To give people an interest in politics and in the management of their own affairs was the grand cultivator of mankind [...] That was one of the reasons why he wanted women to have votes; they needed cultivation as well as men

(Westminster Election 1865 [4], XXVIII: 39)

EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

- **Barring people from education limited people from developing themselves and from developing their interests that would make them happy**
- **Marriage, in so far as (at the time at least) it was normally unequal, led to women developing constrained or artificial personalities**
- **Equality is crucial to allow all to flourish**

**THANK YOU! (NO LECTURE NEXT WEEK
NEXT ONE 14TH NOVEMBER)**

