

JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was the most influential British philosopher of the nineteenth century. More than just a writer, he was a public figure. His technical work in philosophy and economics was always in the service of controversial issues of public policy. In many ways he was the quintessential Victorian intellectual, bringing his critical faculties to bear on all the major issues of the day in a manner that was accessible to the average intelligent layperson. Only Bertrand Russell in the twentieth century has come close to achieving the kind of general public recognition accorded to Mill in the nineteenth.

Nicholas Capaldi's biography (no competitor is currently in print) traces the ways in which Mill's many endeavors are related and explores the significance of Mill's contributions to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of education. He shows how Mill was groomed for his role in life by both his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, the two most prominent philosophical radicals of the early nineteenth century. Yet Mill revolted against this education and developed friendships with Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who introduced him to Romanticism and political conservatism.

A special feature of this biography is the attention devoted to the relationship with Harriet Taylor. No one exerted a greater influence on Mill than the woman he was eventually to marry. Nicholas Capaldi reveals just how deep her impact was on Mill's thinking about the emancipation of women. Clarifying this relationship helps to explain why Mill was concerned not only with such issues as the franchise and representation, but also with a fundamental concept of personal autonomy that became pivotal to his thought.

There has never been a serious attempt to set out the interconnections of Mill's thought in this manner. Moreover, this biography presents the private life as both a reflection and an instantiation of ideas and values – a life so constructed as to be a Romantic work of art.

Nicholas Capaldi is Legendre-Soulé Distinguished Chair in Business Ethics at the College of Business Administration at Loyola University, New Orleans.

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A Biography

Nicholas Capaldi
Loyola University, New Orleans



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of
Jack Robson*

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Preface

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was the most influential British philosopher of the nineteenth century, making significant contributions to all of the major areas of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of education. The *System of Logic* (1843) achieved the status of a canonical textbook. In addition, Mill achieved fame as an economist in 1848 with the publication of the *Principles of Political Economy*, a work that went through seven editions in his own lifetime. Difficulties aside, Mill was the last major British philosopher to present an integrated view of the whole of philosophy and to relate the theoretical and normative dimensions of his thought in a direct fashion.

More than just a writer, Mill was a public figure. His technical work in philosophy and economics was always in the service of the discussion of controversial issues of public policy. In many ways, he was the quintessential Victorian intellectual, bringing his critical faculties to bear on all of the major issues of the day in a manner that was accessible to the average intelligent layperson. Early in his life, Mill conceived the role of being the conscience of his society as a function of journalism, but toward the end of his life he increasingly associated that function with the university. In the twentieth century, only Bertrand Russell has come close to achieving the kind of general public recognition accorded to Mill in the nineteenth.

Mill's active involvement with the affairs of the day, including a term as a member of Parliament, was hardly fortuitous. He was, in fact, groomed for this role by both his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, the two most prominent philosophical radicals of the early part of the nineteenth century. From them, he imbibed the methods and goals of the Enlightenment Project, the attempt to use empirical science as the model for a

social science that would serve as the foundation for social analysis, social critique, and a social technology. It was they who introduced him to the classics of British empirical philosophy and to French writers such as Condillac and Helvétius, writers who had been instrumental in formulating the intellectual and practical dimensions of the Enlightenment Project.

Mill was expected to be not only the articulate messenger but also the fullest embodiment of what the Enlightenment Project could achieve in an individual life. More remarkable than this design was Mill's revolt against it. The revolt, originally occasioned by a mental crisis between 1826 and 1830, began to take an intellectual shape as Mill searched for and was exposed to intellectual traditions different from those he had inherited. Specifically, Mill initiated friendships with Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who introduced him to the Romantic and conservative movements. Mill's crisis and revolt reflect in microcosm the massive nineteenth-century reaction against the Enlightenment.

Contemporaneous with Mill's recovery from his mental crisis was the beginning of his relationship with Harriet Taylor. Aside from his father, no one exerted a greater influence on Mill's life. Although the nature of Mill's relationship with the woman whom he was ultimately to marry is a matter of some speculation, and the true extent of her influence a matter of some dispute, there is one area where her influence was undeniable. That area was the emancipation of women, an issue of enormous importance for Mill and for our understanding of Mill. Given his role as the conscience of his culture, Mill used the role of women and the relationship between the sexes as a focus for bringing together all of the problematic issues of liberal culture. Specifically, Mill was concerned not only with issues of the franchise, representation, "gender," sex, and the way the subordinate role of women contributed to poverty, but also with how the equality of the sexes contributed to fulfillment in the personal lives of autonomous individuals in the liberal culture he so prized.

Today, it is as a social and political philosopher that J. S. Mill's reputation endures. It would be fair to say that, in retrospect, he was the most significant British political philosopher of the nineteenth century. His restatement of liberalism, including his identification of its most salient features and problems, continues to be the starting point for all subsequent discussion within the liberal tradition.

There are five reasons why an intellectual biography of Mill is especially useful. First, an intellectual biography helps to make clear all the

ways in which his various endeavors are related. Although there is a vast secondary literature on Mill, there has never been a serious attempt to work out the interconnections in his thought. Precisely because Mill encompassed so many of what now constitute different academic disciplines, his corpus is typically read in piecemeal fashion. Philosophical treatments usually focus on isolated aspects of his work. The exceptions, such as the fine book by Skorupski, do try to tie together the epistemology with the ethics and the social philosophy. However, Skorupski's book focuses on only four of Mill's works (*System of Logic*, *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, *Utilitarianism*, and *On Liberty*), thereby excluding from consideration some of the political works, such as *Considerations on Representative Government*, as well as both the economic and the religious writings. Sir John Hicks regards Mill as "the most undervalued economist of the nineteenth-century."¹ It would thus be a shame to ignore this dimension of his thought. While philosophy – specifically, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics – is in a very special sense foundational to all thinking, it is not at all clear that we comprehend Mill's philosophy if we read his technical philosophical works in abstraction from his works on politics and economics. As Mill himself said in his 1865 *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, one can evaluate a writer only if one has read all of his or her work and has tried to see each idea in the context created by the corpus as a whole.

Political theorists focus on *On Liberty* and sometimes *Utilitarianism*, but they do not connect these with either the epistemological or the metaphysical doctrines. Both philosophers and political theorists almost always (C. L. Ten is the exception) read *On Liberty* in the light of *Utilitarianism*, even though the former was written before the latter. Economists seem to be the exception, taking a much broader view of Mill. In his authoritative and comprehensive discussion of Mill's economics, Samuel Hollander does look into Mill's epistemology and his conception of methodology and also examines his larger social and political philosophy with regard to issues of the role of government in the economy. But Hollander does not really discuss either the metaphysics or the evolution of Mill's thinking. Pedro Schwartz, on the other hand, discusses the evolution of Mill's economic thinking – specifically, the influence of Mill's father and of Harriet. But Schwartz does not provide the methodological dimension that Hollander does. One thing that an intellectual biography can do is to combine the virtues of Hollander and Schwartz. In short, there is a great deal of valuable

secondary literature, but it has not yet crystallized into a comprehensive vision.

The second reason why an intellectual biography is useful is because it leads to a greater appreciation of the complexity of Mill's sources. Most scholars take for granted the vast knowledge that Mill accumulated in his youth, and it is duly noted that Mill was a synthetic thinker who tried to combine the insights of different traditions. What is not always appreciated is the extent to which he incorporates and transforms his sources. There are many instances, but two stand out. One example is the incorporation of Kantian moral insights from the reading of Humboldt; only recently have scholars (e.g., Bernard Semmel, Charles Taylor, and John Skorupski) begun to take seriously exactly how *On Liberty* is structured by Humboldt and Tocqueville. The second example is Mill's relation to Comte. Comte certainly broadened Mill's understanding of the historical dynamic of social structure, and Mill's rejection of Comte's positivism is well documented. Yet Mill's transformation of what he accepted from Comte brings Mill remarkably close to Hegel.

The third reason is that the evolution of Mill's thinking is part of the very subject matter of his thought, hence the aptness of the allusion to Hegel. In explaining why he wrote his autobiography, Mill acknowledged that "in an age of transition in opinions, there may be somewhat both of interest and benefit in noting the successive phases of any mind which was always pressing forward, equally ready to learn and to unlearn either from his own thoughts or from those of others."² Specifically, when Mill rejected the Enlightenment Project of his father and of Bentham, he did not reject the goal of relating social understanding to social reform. Instead, he reformulated not only his theoretical and practical enterprise but also the relationship between the two. Mill came to believe that genuine social reform originated in self-reformed actors, individuals whose self-consciousness became the prototype for society as a whole. This is also why the arguments against censorship in *On Liberty* ultimately hinge on the moral transformation of individuals who reconstruct the arguments on all sides of a controversy. All lasting political reform is not accomplished directly, through partisan activity, but indirectly, through the reform of culture.

The fourth reason is, paradoxically, that the very existence of the *Autobiography* has been an obstacle to writing an intellectual biography.

In his Preface to Packe's *Life of John Stuart Mill*, F. A. Hayek comments:

There are few other eminent figures in the intellectual life of the nineteenth century about whom some unusual facts are so widely known, and yet of whose whole character and personality we know so little, as John Stuart Mill. Perhaps in no other instance can we see how misleading an impression even the most honest of autobiographies can give. Mill's account of his own life is of course a document of such psychological interest that its very popularity was bound to discourage others from attempting to draw a fuller picture. This alone, however, does not adequately explain why, for eighty years after his death, no satisfactory biography of Mill has been available. In many ways the unique value of his own description of his intellectual development has increased rather than diminished the need for a more comprehensive account of the setting against which it ought to be seen.³

Mill's own *Autobiography* in many ways is the greatest obstacle to writing an intellectual biography of Mill. The *Autobiography* is in large part an intellectual autobiography and is itself a classic worth reading in its own right; it will undoubtedly outlive any secondary source. But by the beginning of the twenty-first century we have been taught by literary critics and others not to take any author at face value. I do not wish to contend that Mill suppressed or distorted significant features of his life. What I want to call attention to is the "spin" he gives to his life and intellectual development in the *Autobiography*. As Collini has stressed, Mill wrote in order to achieve certain effects. Justifying his relationship with Harriet Taylor Mill to Victorian society, memorializing her to a largely incredulous audience, and explaining how much she meant to him are just a few of the various items on his agenda. These items have to be taken into account if we are to be aware of the impression he tries to create in the *Autobiography*. In short, Mill's interests, stated and unstated, in writing the *Autobiography* are not necessarily the interests of a reader or biographer who is trying to see Mill against the backdrop of nineteenth-century social, moral, economic, religious, economic, cultural, and philosophical intellectual developments. On the other hand, Mill's *Autobiography* is what the Germans call a *bildungsroman*, a deliberate attempt to re-create oneself through one's ongoing self-understanding. This conception of autobiography is not a misleading self-editing, but rather a view of the human person that reflects important currents of nineteenth-century thought.

The fifth and final reason for an intellectual biography is one that Mill himself would have appreciated. As he said in an 1846 article, "What shapes

the character is not what is purposely taught, so much as the unintentional teaching of institutions and social relations.” Mill was very much a figure of his time, both shaped by it and helping to shape it. He was, in the best sense, the quintessential Victorian liberal. Recent scholarship has begun to make a more balanced assessment of Victorian Britain, both its influence upon and its continuing relevance to our own world. An intellectual biography of Mill constitutes a contribution to that larger enterprise and benefits from that larger contextualization.

I have taken seriously Mill’s claims about Harriet and attempted to see what light they throw on Mill’s life and thought. I have concluded not only that Harriet exerted a great influence but also that her influence was by and large a positive one. Clarifying their relationship does a great deal to explain the evolution of Mill’s thought. It also exhibits in important respects the larger cultural background of his thought, sometimes in unexpected ways. To the extent that there is a fundamental concept in Mill’s life and thought, it is the concept of personal autonomy, and it was Harriet who helped to make that concept pivotal in Mill’s writings.

I have been fortunate in having available to me the biographies of Bain and Packe, both of which will long continue to be prime sources of information for Mill scholars. The limitations of Bain’s approach are reflected in his dismissal of the importance of Harriet, his failure to recognize the Romantic influence on Mill (Coleridge, for example, is never mentioned), and Bain’s own philosophical agenda, which was not identical to Mill’s. Packe’s book is a gold mine of information, but the stress is more on the life than on the thought. Although Packe recognizes the influence of Harriet, that influence is not cast in a systematic or wholly positive light.

An enormous amount of scholarship has been produced since Packe’s biography, and while very few new or significant details about Mill’s life have been uncovered, the interpretation of those facts is very different when seen in the light of that scholarship. I have had the good fortune to be given a chronology of Mill’s life prepared by John Robson, and this has helped to clarify the sometimes puzzling chronology that appears in Packe. The collected works of Mill edited by Robson is a scholar’s dream, but the challenge of mastering it has been somewhat daunting. In any case, the splendid scholarly work done on Mill since the publication of Packe’s biography certainly calls for a fresh look at Mill’s life, his work, and their relationship. I would reiterate that it is not so much the presence

of new information as the sheer weight of information that should, and will, inspire fresh looks at Mill's life and thought.

The real problem is the sheer volume of material that has been available for some time. The claim that I put forward is that no one has yet wrestled with the whole of Mill and put it into a coherent form. This "volume problem" is present in two dimensions. The first dimension is that Mill wrote in so many fields that few commentators either know or care about the areas with which they are not familiar. Textbook caricatures of Mill as a "utilitarian" or a "socialist" abound, with little awareness of what those terms meant to Mill or in his historical context.

In contrast with the first, the second dimension does bear directly on the biography. Enormous amounts of material have been available for some time but are ignored. For example, Mill was greatly influenced by the Romantic movement in an enormous number of ways (Austin spent time in Germany and came back with many of those ideas; Sarah Austin taught Mill to read German, etc.). You would never know about this from Bain's biography; Packe dwells on the influence of Carlyle but scarcely understands the depth of Coleridge's influence on Mill. The word "Romanticism" does not appear in Packe's index, and Humboldt is mentioned only once. Packe, in general, provides a wealth of detail, but there is no real principle of relative importance at work. His knowledge of philosophy and intellectual history, especially of the nineteenth century, is sketchy at best. All this limits the extent to which his biography can illuminate Mill's intellectual dimension and development. Here and there one finds serious scholars who recognize the Romantic influence, but they do not apply it specifically to Mill's intellectual development.

Aside from seeing the relationship between Mill and Harriet from a new and positive perspective, the other important emphasis in this intellectual biography is the recognition of the influence of Romanticism on Mill's thought. Rarely acknowledged, it has certainly never been considered at length. I argue that it is crucial. A number of commentators have mentioned the extent to which Mill tries to combine ideas or systems of thought that do not seem to fit comfortably with each other. I shall explain this as the consequence not of fuzzy thinking but of trying to maintain loyalty to his father's practical program of liberal reform and, at the same time, to defend and explicate that program by appeal to nineteenth-century Romantic philosophical ideas that his father did not really understand (and probably would have rejected if he had). Can these systems be coherently

combined? I think they can, but it would initially require an extraordinary effort for readers to read the texts in this fashion, an effort they are not likely to make if they are ignorant of Mill's personal struggles and of the alternative Romantic system and its influence upon Mill. Would it have been better for the readers, at any rate, if Mill had not attempted such a compromise and had simply abandoned the philosophical framework he inherited from his father? Undoubtedly this would make reading the published works easier and their integrity more visible. But it would not have resolved Mill's internal psychological struggle, and that underscores why an intellectual biography can be useful.

My aim is to try to provide the big picture – a coherent vision of Mill – and an explication of how his thought evolved. Where I think I am breaking new ground is in presenting an in-depth discussion of how Mill was in fact a Romantic; moreover, during the period from 1830 to 1840, Mill sought to preserve the radical program he had inherited from his father but within a Romantic and conservative framework. By a “conservative” I do not mean a Tory or a defender of the status quo, but one who appreciates the historical and evolving nature of institutions and how they shape us (Coleridge, e.g., but also Macaulay). It would be quite impossible to read the *Logic* without understanding this; perhaps this is why philosophers simply ignore the discussion of the relation between science and art in Book VI.

Another obstacle to understanding Mill is the clarity of his style. Mill's writings seem so accessible that his strengths and weaknesses seem to float clearly on the surface. We are lulled into looking no further. But the ease of expression masks both the enormous capacity for intellectual synthesis – he makes it look so easy – and the painful psychological drama going on in the background. Finally, tracking the evolution of his thinking shows its greater continuity and integrity. In this respect, an intellectual biography, more than anything else, helps us to see the architectonic and wholeness of an author's work.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is trying to see Mill the person, as opposed to focusing on Mill the author and intellectual icon. Mill is such an imposing figure that discovering he even had a private life is analogous to a schoolchild discovering a teacher shopping in a supermarket. Mill was himself quite reticent about such things. However, this reticence is itself an important feature of his life that sheds light on his thought. Most important, Mill's private life was itself in large part a reflection of, and an

instantiation of, the ideas and values that appear in his published works. This integration of life and thought was not only what he espoused but also a reflection of the world in which he found himself, as he understood it. In short, he constructed a life that strove to be a Romantic work of art.

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Acknowledgments

In dedicating this book to Jack Robson, I am not only acknowledging a personal debt but also calling attention to how much Mill scholars everywhere are forever in his debt for his splendid editing of the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. His wife, Ann Robson, kindly made unpublished material available to me.

I should begin by acknowledging my teacher Ernest Nagel, who first introduced me to Mill's writings. The scholar whose work on Mill first attracted my attention, and who has continued to inspire me, is Alan Ryan. Three other scholars who have significantly influenced my reading of Mill are C. L. Ten, Bernard Semmel, and John Gray. A special debt is owed to the Liberty Fund for inviting me to participate in and direct a number of colloquia on Mill; specifically, I wish to thank Emilio Pacheco and Douglas Den Uyl. Among those who participated in these colloquia, special thanks goes to Stuart Warner, Timothy Fuller, Ray Frey, David Levy, Aurelian Craiutu, Nicholas Rescher, Geoff Smith, Janice Carlisle, Geoffrey Brennan, Chandran Kukathas, Gordon Lloyd, Dwight Lee, Stephen Davies, Norman Barry, Joseph Hamburger, Shirley Letwin, Maurice Cowling, Michael Laine, and John Lachs. Three individuals with whom I have discussed Mill's "socialism" are my former student Eric McDaniel, Dale E. Miller, and Jonathan Riley. I also wish to acknowledge the librarians at Somerville College, Oxford, who kindly permitted me to work with their collection of books from Mill's personal library. The Earhart Foundation provided generous support for this project.

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