

John Stuart Mill: Biography

John Stuart Mill was a British philosopher and economist, prominent as a publicist in the reforming age of the 19th century. He remains of lasting interest as a logician and an ethical theorist.

Early life and career.

The eldest son of the British historian, economist, and philosopher James Mill, he was born on May 20, 1806, in his father's house in Pentonville, London. He was educated exclusively by his father, who was a strict disciplinarian. By his eighth year he had read in the original Greek Aesop's *Fables*, Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the whole of the historian Herodotus. He was acquainted with the satirist Lucian, the historian of philosophy Diogenes Laërtius, the Athenian writer and educational theorist Isocrates, and six dialogues of Plato. He had also read a great deal of history in English. At the age of eight he started Latin, the geometry of Euclid, and algebra and began to teach 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 and, by the age of 10 could read Plato and the Athenian statesman Demosthenes with ease. About the age of 12, he began a thorough study of Scholastic logic, at the same time reading Aristotle's logical treatises in the original. In the following year he was introduced to political economy and studied the work of the Scottish political economist and philosopher Adam Smith and that of the English economist David Ricardo.

While the training the younger **Mill** received has aroused amazement and criticism, its most important aspect was the close association it fostered with the strenuous character and vigorous intellect of his father. From his earliest days he spent much time in his father's study and habitually accompanied him on his walks. He thus inevitably acquired many of his father's speculative opinions and his father's way of defending them. But he did not receive the impress passively and mechanically. The duty of collecting and weighing evidence for himself was at every turn impressed upon the boy. His childhood was not unhappy, but it was a strain on his constitution and he suffered from the lack of natural, unforced development.

From May 1820 until July 1821, **Mill** was in France with the family of Sir Samuel Bentham, brother of Jeremy Bentham, the English Utilitarian philosopher, economist, and theoretical jurist. Copious extracts from a diary kept at this time show how methodically he read and wrote, studied chemistry and botany, tackled advanced mathematical problems, and made notes on the scenery and the people and customs of the country. He also gained a thorough acquaintance with the French language. On his return in 1821 he added to his work the study of psychology and of Roman law, which he read with John Austin, his father having half decided on the bar as the best profession open to him. This intention, however, was abandoned, and in 1823, when he had just completed his 17th year, he entered the examiner's office of the

India House. After a short probation he was promoted in 1828 to assistant examiner. For 20 years, from 1836 (when his father died) to 1856, **Mill** had charge of the British East India Company's relations with the Indian states, and in 1856 he became chief of the examiner's office.

In 1822 **Mill** had read P.-E.-L. Dumont's exposition of Bentham's doctrines in the *Traité de Législation*, which made a lasting impression upon him. The impression was confirmed by the study of the English psychologists and also of two 18th-century French philosophers -- Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, who was also a psychologist, and Claude-Adrien Helvétius, who was noted for his emphasis on physical sensations. Soon after, in 1822-23, **Mill** established among a few friends the Utilitarian Society, taking the word, as he tells us, from *Annals of the Parish*, a novel of Scottish country life by John Galt.

Two newspapers welcomed his contributions--*The Traveller*, edited by a friend of Bentham's, and *The Morning Chronicle*, edited by his father's friend John Black. One of his first efforts was a solid argument for freedom of discussion in a series of letters to the *Chronicle* on the prosecution of Richard Carlile, a 19th-century English radical and freethinker. **Mill** seized every chance for exposing departures from sound principle in Parliament and courts of justice. Another outlet was opened up for him (April 1824) with the founding of the *Westminster Review*, which was the organ of the philosophical radicals. In 1825 he began work on an edition of Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* (5 vol., 1827). He took part eagerly in discussions with the many men of distinction who came to his father's house and engaged in set discussions at a reading society formed at the home of English historian George Grote in 1825 and in debates at the London Debating Society, formed in the same year.

Public life and writing.

The *Autobiography* tells how in 1826 **Mill**'s enthusiasm was checked by a misgiving as to the value of the ends that he had set before him. At the London Debating Society, where he first measured his strength in public conflict, he found himself looked upon with curiosity as a precocious phenomenon, a "made man," an intellectual machine set to grind certain tunes. The elder **Mill**, like Plato, would have put poets under ban as enemies of truth; he subordinated private to public affections; and Landor's maxims of "few acquaintances, fewer friends, no familiarities" had his cordial approval. The younger **Mill** now felt himself forced to abandon these doctrines. Too much in awe of his father to make him a confidant, he wrestled with his doubts in gloomy solitude. He emerged from the struggle with a more catholic view of human happiness, a delight in poetry for its own sake, a more placable attitude in controversy, a hatred of sectarianism, and an ambition no less noble and disinterested but moderated to practical possibilities. Gradually, the debates in the Debating Society attracted men with whom contact was invigorating and inspiring. **Mill** ceased to attend the society in 1829, but he carried away from it the conviction that a true system of political philosophy was something much more complex and many-sided than he had previously had any idea of, and that its office was to supply, not a set of model institutions but principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstances might be deduced.

Mill's letters in *The Examiner* in the autumn of 1830, after a visit to Paris, where he made the acquaintance of the younger liberals, may be taken as marking his return to hopeful activity; and a series of articles on "The Spirit of the Age" appeared in the same paper in 1831. During the years 1832 and 1833 he contributed many essays to *Tait's Magazine*, *The Jurist*, and *The Monthly Repository*. In 1835 Sir William Molesworth founded *The London Review*, with **Mill** as editor. It was amalgamated with *The Westminster* (as *The London and Westminster Review*) in 1836, and **Mill** continued as editor (latterly as proprietor, also) until 1840. In and after 1840 he published several important articles in *The Edinburgh Review*. Some of the essays written for these journals were reprinted in the first two volumes (1859) of **Mill's** *Dissertations and Discussions* and give evidence of the increasing width of his interests. Among the more important are "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" (1833), "Writings of Alfred de Vigny" (1838), "Bentham" (1838), "Coleridge" (1840), "M. De Tocqueville on Democracy in America" (1840), "Michelet's History of France" (1844), and "Guizot's Essays and Lectures on History" (1845). The twin essays on Bentham and Coleridge show **Mill's** powers at their splendid best and indicate very clearly the new spirit that he tried to breathe into English radicalism.

During these years **Mill** also wrote his great systematic works on logic and on political economy. His reawakened enthusiasm for humanity had taken shape as an aspiration to supply an unimpeachable method of proof for conclusions in moral and social science; the French positivist philosopher Auguste Comte had some influence here, but the main inspiration undoubtedly came from the English scientist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton, whose physics had already been accepted as a model of scientific exposition by such earlier British philosophers as John Locke, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and James **Mill**. But he was determined that the new logic should not simply oppose the old logic. In his *Westminster* review (of 1828) of Richard Whately's *Elements of Logic*, he was already defending the syllogism against the Scottish philosophers who had talked of superseding it by a supposed system of inductive logic. He required his inductive logic to "supplement and not supersede." For several years he searched in vain for the means of concatenation. Finally, in 1837, on reading William Whewell's *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* and rereading John F.W. Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy*, **Mill** at last saw his way clear both to formulating the methods of scientific investigation and to joining the new logic onto the old as a supplement. A *System of Logic*, in two volumes, was published in 1843 (3rd-8th editions, introducing many changes, 1851-72). Book VI is his valiant attempt to formulate a logic of the human sciences--including history, psychology, and sociology--based on causal explanation conceived in Humean terms, a formulation that has lately come in for radical criticism.

Mill distinguished three stages in his development as a political economist. In 1844 he published the *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*, which he had written several years earlier, and four out of five of these essays are solutions of perplexing technical problems--the distribution of the gains of international commerce, the influence of consumption on production, the definition of productive and unproductive labour, and the precise relations between profits and wages. Here for the most part **Mill** appears as the disciple of David Ricardo, striving after more precise statements and reaching forward to further consequences. In his second stage, originality and independence become more conspicuous as he struggles toward the standpoint from which he wrote his *Principles of Political Economy*. This was published in 1848 (2 vol.; 2nd and 3rd eds., with significant differences, 1849, 1852), and, at about the same time, **Mill** was advocating the creation of peasant

proprietorships as a remedy for the distresses and disorder in Ireland. Thereafter, he made a more thorough study of Socialist writers. He was convinced that the social question was as important as the political question. He declined to accept property, devised originally to secure peace in a primitive society, as necessarily sacred in its existing developments in a quite different stage of society. He separated questions of production and distribution and could not rest satisfied with the distribution that condemned the labouring classes to a cramped and wretched existence, in many cases to starvation. He did not come to a Socialist solution, but he had the great merit of having considered afresh the foundations of society. This he called his third stage as a political economist, and he says that he was helped toward it by Mrs. Taylor (Harriet Hardy), who became his wife in 1851.

It is generally supposed that **Mill** writes with a lover's extravagance about Harriet's powers. He expressly says, indeed, that he owed none of his technical doctrine to her, that she influenced only his ideals of life for the individual and for society, and that the only work directly inspired by her is the essay on the "Enfranchisement of Women" (*Dissertations*, vol. 2). Nevertheless, **Mill's** relations with her have always been something of a puzzle.

During the seven years of his marriage **Mill** became increasingly absorbed in the work of the British East India Company and in consequence published less than at any other period of his life. In 1856 he became head of the examiner's office in the India House, and for two years, till the dissolution of the company in 1858, his official work kept him fully occupied. It fell to him as head of the office to write the defense of the company's government of India when the transfer of its powers was proposed. **Mill** opposed the transfer, and the documents in which he defended the company's administration are models of trenchant and dignified pleading. On the dissolution of the company, **Mill** was offered a seat in the new council but declined it and retired with a pension of £1,500. His retirement from official life was followed almost immediately by his wife's death at Avignon, France. He spent most of the rest of his life at a villa at Saint-Véran, near Avignon, returning to his house at Blackheath only for a short period in each year.

The later years.

Mill sought relief by publishing a series of books on ethics and politics that he had meditated upon and partly written in collaboration with his wife. The essay *On Liberty* appeared in 1859 with a touching dedication to her and the *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* in the same year. In his *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) he systematized opinions already put forward in many casual articles and essays. It has been remarked how **Mill** combined enthusiasm for democratic government with pessimism as to what democracy was likely to do; practically every discussion in these books exemplifies this. His *Utilitarianism* (in *Fraser's Magazine*, 1861; separate publication, 1863) was a closely reasoned attempt to answer objections to his ethical theory and to remove misconceptions about it. He was especially anxious to make it clear that he included in "utility" the pleasures of the imagination and the gratification of the higher emotions; and to make a place in his system for settled rules of conduct.

Mill also began to write again on the wider philosophical questions that had occupied him in the *Logic*. In 1865 he published both his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* and his *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, but in both writings his motives were largely political. It was because he regarded the writings and sayings of Sir William Hamilton as the great fortress of intuitional philosophy in Great Britain that **Mill** undertook to counter his pretensions. In dealing with Comte, **Mill** distinguished sharply between Comte's earlier philosophical doctrine of Positivism and his later religion of humanity. The doctrine he commended (as he had frequently done previously) because he regarded it as a natural development of the outlook of George Berkeley and Hume; the religion he attacked because he saw in it merely another attempt to foist a priestly hierarchy upon suffering humanity. It is noticeable that **Mill's** language in these books is much closer to the language of Bentham and James **Mill** than it had been since his boyhood, and it was as an act of piety that in 1869 he republished his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* with additional illustrations and explanatory notes.

While engaged in these years mainly with theoretical studies, **Mill** did not remit his interest in current politics. He supported the North in the U.S. Civil War, using all his strength to explain that the real issue at stake in the struggle was the abolition of slavery. In 1865 he stood as parliamentary candidate for Westminster, on conditions strictly in accordance with his principles. He would not canvass or pay agents to canvass for him, nor would he engage to attend to the local business of the constituency. He was with difficulty persuaded even to address a meeting of the electors but was elected. He took an active part in the debates preceding the passage of the 1867 Reform Bill, and helped to extort from the government several useful modifications of the bill, for the prevention of corrupt practices. The reform of land tenure in Ireland (see his *England and Ireland*, 1868, and his *Chapters and Speeches on the Irish Land Question*, 1870), the representation of women (see below), the reduction of the national debt, the reform of London government, and the abrogation of the Declaration of Paris (1856)--concerning the carriage of property at sea during the Crimean War--were among the topics on which he spoke. He took occasion more than once to enforce what he had often advocated, England's duty to intervene in foreign politics in support of freedom. As a speaker **Mill** was somewhat hesitating, but he showed great readiness in extemporaneous debate. Elected rector of St. Andrews University, he published his "Inaugural Address" in 1867.

Mill's subscription to the election expenses of the freethinker and radical politician Charles Bradlaugh and his attack on the conduct of Gov. E.J. Eyre in Jamaica were perhaps the main causes of his defeat in the general parliamentary election of 1868. But his studied advocacy of unfamiliar projects of reform had made him unpopular with "moderate Liberals." He retired with a sense of relief to Avignon. His villa was filled with books and newspapers; the country round it furnished him with a variety of walks; he read, wrote, discussed, walked, botanized. He was extremely fond of music and was himself a fair pianist. His stepdaughter, Helen Taylor (died January 1907), was his constant companion after his wife's death. **Mill** was an enthusiastic botanist all his life and a frequent contributor of notes and short papers to the *Phytologist*. During his last journey to Avignon he was looking forward to seeing the spring flowers and completing a flora of the locality.

Mill did not relax his laborious habits or his ardent outlook on human affairs. The essays in the fourth volume of his *Dissertations* (1875; vol. 3 had appeared in

1867)--on endowments, on land, on labour, and on metaphysical and psychological questions--were written for the *Fortnightly Review* at intervals after his short parliamentary career. In 1867 he had been one of the founders, with Mrs. P.A. Taylor, Emily Davies, and others, of the first women's suffrage society, which developed into the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and in 1869 he published *The Subjection of Women* (written 1861), the classical theoretical statement of the case for woman suffrage. His last public activity was concerned with the starting of the Land Tenure Reform Association, for which he wrote in *The Examiner* and made a public speech a few months before his death; the interception by the state of the unearned increment on land and the promotion of cooperative agriculture were the most striking features in his program, which he regarded as a timely compromise in view of the impending struggle between capital and labour in Europe. His *Autobiography* and *Three Essays on Religion* (1874) were published posthumously.

Mill died at Avignon on May 8, 1873. A bronze statue of him stands on the Thames embankment in London, and G.F. Watts's copy of his original portrait of **Mill** hangs in the National Gallery there.

Influence and significance.

Mill was a man of extreme simplicity in his mode of life. The influence that his works exercised upon contemporary English thought can scarcely be overestimated, nor can there be any doubt about the value of the liberal and inquiring spirit with which he handled the great questions of his time. Beyond that, however, there has been considerable difference of opinion about the enduring merits of his philosophy. At first sight he is the most lucid of philosophers. Many people have spoken of the marvelous intelligibility of his writing. Usually, however, it is not long before doubts begin to creep in. Although the lucidity remains, its span is seen to be somewhat limited, and one sometimes has the uneasy feeling that he is being equally lucid on both sides of a question.

Oddly enough, however, this judgment has not led to any neglect of **Mill**. Little attention is now paid to Hamilton or to Whewell, but **Mill**'s name continually crops up in philosophical discussions. This is partly due to the fact that **Mill** offers a body of doctrine and a set of technical terms on many subjects (notably on induction) that have proved extremely useful in the classroom. But a more important reason is that he has come to be regarded as a sort of personification of certain tendencies in philosophy that it is regarded as continually necessary to expound or expose because they make such a powerful appeal to serious minds. Thus he is or says he is a Utilitarian; yet nothing, it is pointed out, could tell more strongly against Utilitarianism than certain passages in his writings. Then again, he is said to be an Empiricist (although he says himself that he is not), and his theories of the syllogism and of mathematics are constantly used to demonstrate the fatal consequences of this way of thinking.

It is misleading to speak without qualification of **Mill**'s Utilitarianism. Nor is it sufficient to add that **Mill** modified the Utilitarianism that he inherited from Bentham and from his father in one way and another in order to meet the criticisms that it encountered in Victorian times. He does, it is true, sometimes give that impression

(as in his essay *Utilitarianism*); but elsewhere (as in his essay *On Liberty*) he scarcely attempts to conceal the fact that his premises are completely independent of Bentham's. Thus, contrary to the common belief, it appears to be very hazardous to characterize offhand the precise position of **Mill** on any major philosophical topic. He sometimes behaved with a reckless disregard of consequences more suitable to a Romantic than to a Utilitarian. He is thoroughly romantic, again, and thoroughly representative of his age in the eagerness with which he seeks out and endeavours to assimilate every last exotic line of thought which shows any signs of vitality. He himself claimed to be superior to most of his contemporaries in "ability and willingness to learn from everybody," and indeed, for all his father's careful schooling, there was never anybody less buttoned up against alien influences than **Mill**. In his writings there can be discerned traces of every wind of doctrine of the early 19th century.

Positivism and social theory in Comte, Mill, and Marx.

The absolute Idealists wrote as if the Renaissance methodologists of the sciences had never existed. But if in Germany the Empirical and scientific tradition in philosophy lay dormant, in France and in England in the middle of the 19th century it was very much alive. In France, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) wrote his great philosophical history of science, *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42; *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* [abridged]) in six volumes. Influenced by Bacon and the entire school of British Empiricism, by the doctrine of progress put forward by Turgot and Condorcet during the 18th century, and by the very original social reformer Henri de Saint-Simon, Comte called his philosophy "Positivism," by which he meant a philosophy of science so narrow that it denied any validity whatsoever to "knowledge" not derived through the accepted methods of science. But the *Cours de philosophie positive* made its point not by dialectic but by an appeal to the history of thought, and here Comte presented his two basic ideas:

1. The notion that the sciences have emerged as sciences in strict order, beginning with mathematics and astronomy, followed by physics, chemistry, and biology in that order, and culminating in the new science of sociology, to which Comte was the first to ascribe the name;
2. The so-called "law of the three stages," which views thought in every field as passing progressively from superstition to science by first being (a) religious, then (b) abstract, or metaphysical, and finally (c) positive, or scientific. Comte's permanent contribution was to initiate an antireligious and an antimetaphysical bias in the philosophy of science that has passed into the 20th century.

In mid-19th-century England the chief representative of the Empirical tradition from Bacon to Hume was John Stuart **Mill** (1806-73). **Mill**'s theory of knowledge, best presented in his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865), was not particularly original but rather a judicious combination of the doctrines of Berkeley and Hume; but it symbolized his mistrust of vague metaphysics, his denial of the a priori element in knowledge, and his determined opposition to any form of intuitionism. It is in his enormously influential *System of Logic* (1843), however, that **Mill**'s chief theoretical ideas are to be found.

This work, as part of its subtitle, *the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, shows, was concerned less with formal logic than with scientific methodology. **Mill** made here the fundamental distinction between deduction and induction, defined induction as the process by which men discover and prove general propositions, and presented his "four methods of experimental inquiry" as the heart of the inductive method. These methods were, in fact, only an enlarged and refined version of Francis Bacon's "tables of discovery." But the most significant section of *A System of Logic* was its conclusion: book 6, "On the Logic of the Moral Sciences."

Mill had taken men's experience of the uniformity of nature as the warrant of induction. Here he reaffirmed the belief of Hume that it is possible to apply the principle of causation and the methods of physical science to moral and social phenomena. These may be so complex as to yield only "conditional predictions," but in this sense there are "social laws." Thus Comte and **Mill** agreed upon the possibility of a true social science.

Mill's *Logic* was extremely influential, and it continued to be taught at Oxford and Cambridge well into the 20th century; but in the end his importance lay less in logic and theory of knowledge than in ethics and political theory. For **Mill** was the great apostle of political liberalism in the 19th century, a true follower of John Locke. And, just as Locke and Rousseau had represented the liberal and the radical wings of social theory in the early modern period, so **Mill** and Karl Marx represented the liberal and the radical approaches to social reform 100 years later.

Raised by social reformers (his father, James **Mill**, and Jeremy Bentham) to be a social reformer himself, **Mill's** social theory was an attempt, by gradual means arrived at democratically, to combat the evils of the Industrial Revolution. His ethics, expressed in his *Utilitarianism* (1861), followed the formulations of Bentham in finding the end of society to consist in the production of the greatest quantity of happiness for its members, but he gave to Bentham's cruder (but more consistent) doctrines a humanistic and individualistic slant. Thus, the moral self-development of the individual becomes the ultimate value in **Mill's** ethics.

This trend was also expressed in his essay *On Liberty* (1859) and *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861). In the former he stated the case for the freedom of the individual against "the tyranny of the majority," presented strong arguments in favour of complete freedom of thought and discussion, and argued that no state or society has the right to prevent the free development of human individuality. In the latter he provided a classic defense for the principle of representative democracy, asked for the adequate representation of minorities, urged renewed public participation in political action for necessary social reforms, and pointed up the dangers of class-oriented or special-interest legislation.

A radical counterbalance to **Mill's** liberal ideas was provided by Karl Marx (1818-83), a German philosopher, social revolutionary, and political economist. Taking over from Hegel the idea of estrangement (which Hegel had used in a metaphysical sense), Marx used this notion prior to 1848 to indicate the alienation of the worker from the enjoyment of the products of his work, the crass treatment of human labour as a mere commodity (and man as a thing), and, in fact, the general dehumanization of man in a selfish, profit-seeking capitalist society.

In the famous *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx, yielding to the revolutionary temper of the times, called (as Rousseau had done before the French Revolution) for the violent overthrow of the established order. All of history, Marx said, is the struggle between exploiting minorities and the underlying population, that is, between bourgeois and proletarians; and he advocated the formation of a Communist Party to stimulate proletarian class consciousness toward the seizure of power and the institution of a just and democratically managed Socialist society.

Marx's revolutionary fervour may have tended to dampen his philosophical reputation in the West, and his philosophical achievement remains a controversial point; but certain of his ideas (some Hegelian in inspiration, some original) have endured. Among these are the ideas:

1. That society is a moving balance (dialectic) of antithetical forces that produce social change;
2. That there is no conflict between a rigid economic determinism and a program of revolutionary action;
3. That ideas (including philosophical theories) are not purely rational and thus independent of external circumstance but depend upon the nature of the social order in which they arise.