

Autobiography

J.S.Mill

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John Stuart Mill was the son of James Mill. The latter had risen from humble Scottish surroundings, his father was a shoemaker, and become a disciple of Bentham and a well-known writer and political theorist. He may nevertheless not lived up fully to his own expectations, because he decided to give his eldest son - John Stuart, a thoroughly educational grinding. One may naturally ask, whether not all of his children became beneficiaries of his educational project, but obviously not every child is receptive to such an ordeal, and besides, the work involved was considerable, and his capacity only allowed him one charge, who incidentally was also charged in his turn with the education of his younger siblings. Thus at the age of three Mill Jr was taught Greek and at eight also Latin. He read profusely, both what his father had assigned and also what he himself had sought out. Obviously reading came naturally to him, and in his autobiography he fondly recalls all the books he studied, most of them fairly obscure two hundred years later (but he read and liked Robinson Crusoe, and what child does not?). Most of the work was historical in character, and he professed a partiality for dramatic narratives involving battles, something that appeals to most young boys. But his reading was not leisurely, his father demanded of him to discuss what he had read, also to recall it in his own words. In that way he was constantly engaged mentally with his father, whom he held in great awe; and as already noted, the engagement was draining on the father as well, engaged as he was in many writing projects¹. One does surmise that the father was spared household duties and such menial chores. In addition to this the young Mill received also some instruction in natural science, but he was a bookish boy indeed by temperament and he did in later life regret his impracticality, and of that there probably was not much. He also studied mathematics. But he got stuck in infinitesimal calculus, and his father did neither have the time nor the natural ability to assist him here (and without some kind of helpful assistance, Mill inevitably was at large). Mill, whose education was focused on rational discourse, claims somewhat disingenuously that mathematics is not such a good science for ratiocination. This might shock the mathematician, but of course Mill has a point. Mathematics is pure reasoning, and thus in a sense rather transparent, at least in its elementary aspects to which most philosophers are exposed. While the real challenge to rational reasoning comes when the premises are not to so openly presented, but have to be teased out of a confusing mess. Thus the reasoning imagination of the young Mill was far more stimulated by the dialogues of Plato.

Mill must have been a lonely boy, so far elevated from his peers in education, and reduced to the harsh company of his father. His father made a point to forestall any tendency to conceit, and in no way was the son to understand that he was in anyway

¹ particularly his large work on a 'History of India' appreciated at the time but later come up for much censoring as being a typical desktop product.

remarkable, all the advantages over other boys his age he invariably would not help noticing, were due not to his own innate ability as to his singularly good luck being the beneficiary of such a good education. Was it a good education? Obviously it might not have worked for everyone, in fact one suspects, as already intimated above, that only a minority of pupils would have had the intellectual stamina to survive such an unrelenting gauntlet. But Mill seems to have genuinely liked it, and he went through his teens developing even further, going to France, picking up French quickly, and beginning to write publishable essays and engage in intellectual debates, before the advent of his third decade. But some kind of backlash was inevitable. And at the age of twenty he started to wonder what was the use of it all? His education, had not had as goal to enhance his glory, but to make him a servant of mankind, to pursue his life in order to make the world a better place than he had found it. Of course such idealism is not impossible today, but I believe it is both rarer as well as harder. The notorious vision of human progress entertained so earnestly in the Victorian Age, is now considered naive. At twenty he consequently asked himself, what would be the case would all his ambitions for the welfare of humanity be fulfilled? What if there would be nothing more to strive for? The thought filled him with despair, and he drew the inevitable logical conclusion, that indeed what he strove for could be of little value if its attainment would bring him so little happiness. He found himself in an intellectual impasse, out of which the usual remedies, such as a good nights sleep or a brisk walk, no longer were able to bring him. It was felt as a nervous breakdown, although it is hard to believe that it was so serious, except in comparison with the normal progress of his life so far. It is tempting to see this as a symptom of mental exhaustion, the eventual reward of so many years of toil and focus. But he rallied, shook it off as an anomaly, and went on with the due course of his life. He learned something though, that personal happiness can never be the ultimate goal of a life, because once you ask yourself whether you are happy, you will cease to be so. Happiness is a symptom of a good life lived, just as health and vigor provide a basis for as well as a reward of, but can never be the real aim. Thus he could continue unimpeded.

But was it a happy life? It certainly was in many ways a contended and well-spent life, but without any real excitement, at least none of the kind that enhances a biographical narrative. But maybe truly happy lives should rather be lived than read about. His father had been employed by the East India Company (which to some extent explains his writing of the history of India) and he had secured for his son a position there as well. This was ideal, as Mill explains, the tasks given to him were stimulating without being demanding, they served to earn him his daily bread, without dulling his faculties by mindless repetition, nor exhausting them by challenging application. Thus he was able to lead a double life, one of the useful citizen, and the other to pursue his further intellectual development and real work as a writer and former of public opinion. Of quotidian his work in the company he reveals very little, except that it seems mainly to have been of the 'pen-pushing' kind, of his work as a writer he says the more. What really played a role was his participation in various debating societies and his contributions to various reviews, notably the *Westminster Review* in the beginning of his career, to which his father also contributed notably. We learn about the classical difficulties of a review, of maintaining a wide enough subscription without compromising its quality, to make its survival both

feasible and worthwhile. Such reviews nevertheless only came into being by a combination of financial generosity and a willingness of editors and contributors alike to provide their services with no thought of remuneration. The problem with periodicals, Mill correctly divined, is that they have to prove their worth immediately, while a book can come into its own long after its initial publication date. Nevertheless he was a tireless writer of articles and pamphlets, developing some of them into essays, and later on full-scale works, such as his book on Logic.

Politically he was of the left, having accepted the creed of his father as readily as he had subjugated himself to his educational strictures. It was the creed of a harsh Scottish man of the Enlightenment brought up in the 18th century. In particular it was secular to the point of belligerency². He and his father certainly belonged to the radical wing of the Liberal Party, and as his main interest was in the theory of politics, it was inevitable that he eventually would enter the fray of practical politics running for a seat in Parliament. Initially this was not an option, due to his connection with the East India Company, but when that company under the auspices of Palmerstone was dissolved there were no longer any excuses to withstand the pressures of his supporters. He ran a campaign marked by excessive honesty but was elected nevertheless, and he spent three years in the House. But after those three years he had made his position untenable. The Tories had initially suspected him to be an ally, due to his critical opinions of representative democracy, but later found out that unlike themselves, those were not the only opinions he entertained on the matter. Next time around the Tories rallied and made a point of ousting him. Probably Mill was more relieved than disappointed.

From a personal point of view his life was dominated by two people. First and foremost by his father, of whom he was in awe for the better part of his childhood and youth, and only later did he attain enough confidence to stand up to him and differ on certain issues³. Then there was Harriet Taylor, his intellectual companion and later wife, of whom he writes in such florid terms. Of the two, the latter is far more intriguing, at least to modern readers. Harriet Taylor was already married when he met her, being the teenage bride to a certain Mr Taylor, with whom she had two children. Clearly from an early stage she became his bosom friend, and he must have usurped from her husband much what was his due. The fact of their close conjugation must have raised many an eye-brow, and it is very hard not to suspect that there must have been a very strong sexual tie, although Mill of course goes to great lengths to dispel such a notion, without explicitly expressing it. But the fact that they did eventually marry must give the lie to such a purely platonic relation. On the other hand Mill might have suffered from, or perhaps rather benefitted from a reduced libido, and the subsequent marriage upon the death of her husband, may have been in the nature of a convenience to forestall aspirations being thrown upon her virtue.

² Mill famously asserted that considering the moral fibre of God, he was happy and proud to go to Hell after his death.

³ Although marginally so. James Mill thought that womens suffrage was not that important, as they would anyway tend to vote like their husbands. And of course there is some point to it, just as general elections could be made simpler by restricting the electorate to statistically representative sub-bodies, just as in Gallups. But John Stuart Mill begged to differ on general principle, and could to his satisfaction note that Bentham was of like opinion.

On such matters Mill predictably does not deign to dwell, this would be the obvious task of future biographers to speculate upon, and no doubt that have.

Harriet Taylor is credited with everything Mill wrote in maturity, even if she never appeared as a co-author, ostensibly on her own request. One has no choice but to take Mill's word when he claims that everything he wrote down had been whetted with her before, and that she was responsible for the radicalization of his opinions. He makes a point of instructing the reader, that as to the necessity of female suffrage, he was no need of persuasion, that stand he had taken long before; but her real contribution was in being able to provide so many practical points of view and to make the issues far more concrete. Mill himself was by temperament a theoretician, and who easily would have been led astray without being anchored.

Mill acknowledges that of the two, Bentham was the more original thinker than his father, and that his books will continue to exert an influence. But the elder Mill had a personal charm that the former may have lacked, and though his sustained association with many young men, was able to further the Benthamine causes more effectively perhaps than the man himself may have though his books alone. When it came to personal argument in real time and face to face, Mill had seen none equal to that of his father. And indeed the father Mill strikes the reader as a more interesting and more complicated personality than that of the son, whose personal achievements appear more remarkable than his charge. In fact James Mill must have formed himself, while John Stuart Mill seems to have become a mere likeness of his father destined to extend his work beyond his lifetime.

The opinions of Mill may not strike us as very remarkable. To a large extent this is due to their success. We now associate them with political correctness, and few people of today of a liberal bent dare to question them. His advocacy of a secular life, in which religion is banned from the public sphere of practical politics, universal right of voting, including that of women of course, the abolition of slavery, the need for education for everybody, freedom of speech, and the utilitarian creed of Bentham of welfare applicable to everyone, are now of course considered almost banal. But Mill was born already in 1806, during the Napoleonic time, when the French Revolution was just twenty years in the past. During his youth and manhood, Socialist ideas became widely discussed, and although he was in basic sympathy he was careful to draw a line, fearful of the despotism of the majority, the classical argument against democracy, or at least its representative aspects. As he saw it, education was the key element in democracy. Democracy could only work if the populace was enlightened. Hence his views on education are particular pertinent, even if his personal experience may be unrepresentative (more so today actually than in the past). He is clear that of pupils should be demanded more than they can be expected to do, lest they do not fully attain what they are actually able to do. He does of course condemn the old brutal methods of teaching involving corporeal punishment or at least its threat, on the other hand he warns against the other extreme of making everything easy and interesting, because by so doing, one sacrifices one of the chief objects of education, and runs the risk of bringing up a generation whose members are incapable of doing anything which is disagreeable to them. Those apprehensions seem almost more relevant today than hundred and fifty years ago. On a more fundamental level, Mill ascribed to a philosophy in which there were no innate ideas, everything was the result of experience. In the same vein he opposed the

tyranny of feeling, arguing that feelings always had to be justified by reason, and not the other way around. So many fixed ideas could be laid at the conviction that certain things were ordained beforehand, and the arguments for such convictions were never deeper than mere feelings. In his *Logic* he denounces a Platonic basis for mathematics (and logic itself?) but see them as expedients borne out of experience. On those fundamental issues, it would be rash indeed to concede to Mill the last word; on the contrary his basic philosophy may be seen as serving his temperamental brand of political optimism. As a theoretician he had his strengths, correctly realizing that politics is ultimately about power, and political institutions are designed and formed by those in power to further their aims. Thus to someone like Mill, there can be no political theory unaided by fundamental psychological insights, and as we have noted, that must be a blank slate psychology, in spite of its obvious flaws. Of course Mill was not the originator of such an approach, but a most vocal propagandist for it. And thus he was a rather towering figure to the intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th century, his influence having waned considerably since then. So after all the final verdict on the man, in spite of his earnestness and good intentions, was one of a great propagandist. On the other hand, earnestness and good intentions are exactly what creates a great propagandist.

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