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Source: *Review of Social Economy*, DECEMBER 2001, Vol. 59, No. 4 (DECEMBER 2001), pp. 467-490

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29770132>

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John Stuart Mill's Theory Of Justice

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Abstract John Stuart Mill has traditionally been portrayed as self-contradictory and failing to construct a unified social theory. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this view, finding Mill's work to be creatively synthetic in bridging the antinomies inherent in liberal democratic thought. This revisionist interpretation of Mill is advanced by an understanding of his theory of justice and its role in shaping his policy positions on issues such as welfare, education, voting rights, property rights, taxation, government intervention, and the future of capitalism.

Keywords: capitalism, ethics, equality, justice, liberty, rights, security, socialism, taxation, utilitarianism

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1980s, John Stuart Mill's contributions to social theory were viewed as limited advances in the fields of logic, ethics, economics and political theory. Nearly all interpreters agreed that Mill failed to construct a comprehensive theoretical system applicable to any one, let alone all, of the aforementioned disciplines. A brief survey of the literature confirms this point as the charge of "muddleheadedness and inconsistency" appears repeatedly. Mill's inadequacies have been attributed to an "identity crisis" induced by the child-rearing techniques of his father and Jeremy Bentham (Britton 1953, Borchard 1957, Mazlish 1975, Halliday 1976). An alternative explanation suggests that Mill was intellectually seduced by the strong-willed Harriet Taylor and, as a result, attempted to incorporate ideas incompatible with his own principles (Himmel-farb 1974). Less generous critics simply question the adequacy of Mill's intellect; "He was often bewildered by the intricacies of his own thought, unaware of the implications of what he had said and of what still remained to be

Review of Social Economy

ISSN 0034 6764 print/ISSN 1470-1162 online © 2001 The Association for Social Economics

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>

DOI: 10.1080/00346760110081580

proved" (Plamenatz 1958: 122). His theories "were always inadequate to the load that he made them carry" (Sabine 1961: 714). He attempted to encompass and synthesize diametrically opposing viewpoints (Anschutz 1963), and thus there could be no "way of patching up [his] system which will make it both systematic and persuasive" (Ryan 1970: xx).

Mill's reputation suffered a similar fate in the hands of historians of economic thought. His "economic theory lacks the logical rigour and his social philosophy the unflinching consistency which are the outstanding characteristics of the 'system-builders'" (Roll 1992: 322). Moreover, he is unoriginal; "apart from certain elaborations of the theory of foreign trade, it is doubtful whether Mill added much, or anything, to the body of economic doctrine" (Gray 1931: 279). Schumpeter was able to muster only faint praise for Mill's "stimulating discrepancies of doctrine" (1963: 450).

Some writers who defend the consistency of Mill's writings do so by suppressing important facets of his thought. Ignoring Mill's trenchant defense of liberty and individuality, Cowling claims that Mill's "liberalism was a dogmatic, religious one," with "more than a touch of something resembling moral totalitarianism" (Cowling 1963: xii-xiii). McCloskey makes the same charge that "Mill was seriously exposed to the danger of becoming . . . a moral totalitarian" (1971: 97). At the opposite extreme, Mill is accused of ignoring the role of moral authority and relying on a "voluntaristic Utopianism" in which the autonomous choices of rational individuals are the sole source of social progress (Gray 1989: 288, Chlor 1985).

However, during the past thirty years, a revisionist body of Mill scholarship has persuasively argued for a comprehensive unity in Mill's thought that situates him solidly within the liberal democratic tradition. The pioneering figure in this movement is John Robson, the general editor of the thirty-three volumes of Mill's collected works, who finds "a unity underlying Mill's mature thought, a unity both of purpose and method, hidden often in a welter of detail, seldom explicitly formulated, but always present" (Robson 1968: ix). Similarly, John Rees claims that correctly interpreting Mill's separate works requires familiarity with the broad scope of his thought (Rees 1977). This theme of unity has been taken up and advanced by a more recent generation of Mill scholars (See Berger 1984, Riley 1988, Skorupski 1989, Donner 1991, Kurer 1991, and Lyons 1994).

The purpose of the present article is to contribute to the argument for unity in Mill's work by presenting his theoretical constructions as components of or corollaries to a theory of justice. We begin by examining the challenges confronting early nineteenth century liberal theories of justice. We then attempt to make explicit what we believe to be the implicit structure of argumentation in

Mill's work, defending the claim that a theory of justice serves as the linchpin holding Mill's intellectual edifice intact. Finally, we suggest that Mill's theory of justice, properly understood, can resolve nearly all apparent inconsistencies in his pronouncements on political and economic issues, thereby demonstrating the essential unity of his work.

Liberal Theories of Justice

By the end of the eighteenth century, the ascendancy of mobile property and competitive markets was undermining prevailing notions of justice based on moral sentiments and/or natural rights self-evident to reason. Moral sentiments were deemed to be insufficiently objective to prevent prejudices and narrow interests from masquerading as legitimate social norms, while reason-based natural rights had been tainted by their usage in the ideological justification of the French and American revolutions, as exemplified by Tom Paine's appeal to "common sense." Theories of justice based on natural rights fell into disrepute because they posed potential barriers to the interests of both owning and laboring classes. From the perspective of owners, natural rights provided a potential basis for moral and political restraint on the pursuit of profit. Workers, on the other hand, could view natural rights as blocking efforts for progressive reform of existing institutions.

The dynamics of early nineteenth century liberal thought reflect the political task of uniting owners and workers in a coalition to oppose aristocratic power. In an effort to broaden liberalism's base of support, theorists sought both to defend property rights and to oppose fixed status, hierarchy, and arbitrary authority. Property rights were acknowledged to be a social convention rather than a natural right, so the rules of justice were open to revision in light of new knowledge and changed circumstances. However, existing rights had to be given legitimacy in order to appeal to property owners. The challenge confronting liberal theorists was to formulate a theory of justice in which rights were sufficiently secure to satisfy owners and sufficiently flexible to appeal to laborers.

The theoretical opposition to natural rights crystallized in the form of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. To generate consensus on questions of justice, Bentham sought a single, incontrovertible criterion of right. He rejected appeals to right reason, common sense, natural law, or moral sentiment on the grounds that they provided no "extrinsic ground" for moral judgments:

What one expects to find in a principle is something that points out some external consideration as a means of warranting and guiding the internal sentiments of approbation and disapprobation; this expectation is but ill fulfilled by a proposition

which does neither more nor less than hold up each of those sentiments as a ground and standard itself.

(1970: 25)

For Bentham, reason was not an “inner light” to be consulted on moral issues, but rather a capacity for objective assessment of empirical phenomena. Any theory of justice not grounded in consequences was, according to Bentham, subjective and therefore incapable of offering principles commanding the assent of opposing interests. In Bentham’s hands, the methods of rationalism and empiricism were synthesized. By disclaiming any reliance on *a priori* knowledge, the utilitarians firmly aligned themselves with the empiricist side of liberal theory as developed by Hume. Yet the utilitarians were rationalists insofar as they believed that reason could disclose objective grounds for moral decisions. Their rationalism avoided the subjectivity of intuitionism by focusing on consequences rather than *a priori* assumptions. However, the assessment of consequences raised the thorny issue of interpersonal comparisons of utility. After admitting that utilities experienced by different persons could not be aggregated, Bentham argued that the opposite must be assumed:

Tis vain to talk of adding quantities which after the addition will continue distinct as they were before, one man’s happiness will never be another man’s happiness: a gain to one man is no gain to another: you might as well pretend to add twenty apples to twenty pears, which after you had done that could not be forty of any one thing but twenty of each just as they were before. This addibility of the happiness of different subjects, however when considered rigorously it may appear fictitious, is a postulatam without the allowance of which all political reasoning is at a standstill.

(unpublished manuscript, quoted in Halevy 1955: 495)

In practice, Bentham elided the issue of measurable and interpersonally commensurable utility by assuming a harmony of interests throughout society. When interests are harmonious, free trade and a policy of *laissez faire* can be expected to expand utility. Bentham’s substantive proposals focused primarily on jurisprudence and cases in which egregious injustice or suffering could be mitigated by specific policy changes.

Bentham’s utilitarianism loses its claim to objectivity when widespread conflicts of interest are present. Individuals and classes will vie with each other to determine the social assessment of pleasure and pain. Ironically, after discrediting all other bases for justice, Bentham left liberal society without objective justification. By portraying all laws and customs as mere social conventions, he inadvertently encouraged individuals to resent any restrictions on their pursuit of private advantage. Moreover, by focusing on the forward-looking notion of consequences rather than the backward-looking notion of

rights, Bentham made the very definition of rights the object of political contestation. Those groups with sufficient political power to determine the public assessment of utility would define rights and justice. By 1840, the polarization of class interests was sufficiently advanced to persuade John Stuart Mill that a new theory of justice was needed.

Implicit in Mill's writings is recognition of three criteria which must be met by a viable liberal theory of justice:

- 1) Subjectivity—the rules of justice must conform, to a significant degree, with the interests of citizens since no democratic society can be called just if large numbers of its citizens perceive otherwise;
- 2) Objectivity—an objective criterion of justice is needed for settling conflicts between competing interests and assessing the fairness of alternative policies and institutions.
- 3) Adaptive Evolution—the dictates of justice must be sufficiently flexible to evolve over time in response to changes in individual interests and social institutions.

The dual grounding of a liberal theory of justice in both subjective and objective realms is necessitated by the tension between individual freedom and social order. If social institutions are to elicit continued popular support, they must be perceived as legitimate in the minds of citizens. However, any purely subjective theory of justice is untenable since it leaves rights and political obligation without foundation. In Mill's words, if duties are based solely on "a feeling in [one's] own mind," then any person "may possibly draw the conclusion that when the feeling ceases the obligation ceases, and that if he finds it inconvenient, he may disregard it" (*Collected Works* x: 229). Conversely, social institutions embody objective criteria of justice that must be adopted by citizens as subjective interests if social stability is to be secured. However, any purely objective theory of justice (e.g., basing rights on birth status, property ownership, gender, or race) is made problematic by the diversity of interests in democratic societies and by the liberal commitment to open-ended opportunity for all.

A coherent liberal theory of justice thus requires an objective criterion congruent with the interests of citizens and, simultaneously, a subjective criterion that affirms the norms embodied in social institutions. This duality was recognized by John Locke, who based property rights on both natural law and consent, and by Adam Smith, who relied on both natural law and approbation. Jeremy Bentham appealed to utility as both subjective (i.e., pleasure experienced by individuals) and objective (i.e., measurable and interpersonally comparable).

However, Bentham's utilitarianism failed to provide an adequate theory of justice for liberal societies in which conflicts of interest are endemic.

Conceptualizing Mill's Theory of Justice

Mill was acutely aware of the ideological vacuum left by Bentham and perceived the need for a revised theory of justice. The basis for this theory can be discerned in his writings on methodology. Although he firmly aligns himself with empiricism, Mill believes that the empirical method in social science is flawed by its inability to distinguish between natural behaviors and those shaped by prevailing institutions and the prevailing level of human development. Induction from observed facts is also unreliable because in social affairs, a "plurality of causes exists in almost boundless excess and effects are for the most part inextricably interwoven with one another" (*Collected Works* viii: 452).

Supplemental modes of inquiry are needed because "[t]he nature and laws of things in themselves or of the hidden causes of the phenomena which are the objects of experience appear to us radically inaccessible to the human faculties" (*Dissertations and Discussions* i: 409). These laws cannot be intuited, but neither can they be mere empirical generalizations because nature does not reveal itself in full:

Nature means the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produced them; including not only all that happens but all that is capable of happening; the unused capabilities of causes being as much a part of the idea of Nature as those which take effect.

(*Collected Works* x: 374)

While experience furnishes the material of knowledge, it must be analyzed in conjunction with general principles or laws in order to provide a suitable basis for understanding. Efforts to theorize about social institutions require postulated psychological laws because "the laws of the phenomena of the society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state" (*Collected Works* viii: 879). Deduction in social science begins with "the laws of nature of individual man," and Mill relies on three such laws: the principle of utility, the principle of sociality, and the principle of progress. Yet these commitments in no way eliminate the necessary role of observation and experience in social science:

The ground of confidence in any concrete deductive science is not the *a priori* reasoning itself, but the accordance between its results and those of observation *a*

posteriori. Either of these processes, apart from the other, diminishes in value as the subject increases in complication.

(*Collected Works* viii: 896–897)

Thus, Mill's postulates are not so much *a priori* truths as working hypotheses used to interpret and confirm the results of empirical observation.

Mill's first psychological law, the principle of utility, follows Bentham in equating utility with happiness. The "ultimate end" sought by humans is a life "exempt as far as possible from pain and as rich as possible in enjoyments" (*Collected Works* x: 214). In addition to being a postulated general law underlying human behavior, Mill defends the principle of utility as an accurate description of observable behavior. Humans consistently choose those things that "are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain" (*Collected Works* x: 210). Moreover, because the principle of utility represents corroboration of a general principle by observed behavior, it provides a basis for moral evaluation. In Mill's words, "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (*Collected Works* x: 210).

A second psychological law utilized by Mill is the principle of sociality. He claims that each individual has as "one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feelings and aims and those of his fellow creatures" (*Collected Works* x: 233). This principle is not based solely on intuition; ". . . the [social] feelings exist, a fact in human nature, the reality of which . . . [is] proved by experience" (*Collected Works* x: 229). Sociality creates the human capacity for developing attachment to the common good by internalizing social norms and laws as personal standards and goals. For Mill, the principle of sociality provides "a natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality" (*Collected Works* x: 231). By establishing "the ultimate sanction of the greatest-happiness morality," it transforms utilitarianism from an empirical description of the pursuit of individual pleasure into a basis for social morality (*Collected Works* x: 233). The happiness "which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (*Collected Works* x: 218).

Mill's third psychological law, the principle of progress, is a corollary of the second. He believes that the social feeling is "one of those which tend to become stronger . . . from the influences of advancing civilization" (*Collected Works* x: 231). As the level of production and prosperity advances and legal distinctions between classes diminish, humans are brought into more intensely social and

cooperative relations, their level of knowledge increases, and their moral and aesthetic sensitivities develop. Given the appropriate social environment, Mill claims that humans naturally progress toward the realization of potential capacities for qualitatively higher forms of pleasure. Whereas Bentham treated pleasure as a uniform phenomenon differentiated only by quantity, Mill insists that “some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others” (*Collected Works* x: 211). For example, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (*Collected Works* x: 212). With this revision, Mill’s conception of happiness is “much more like the Greek *eudaimonia*—a development of those capacities which are characteristically human, a fulfillment of those potentialities which are unique to human beings.” Indeed, it is “more akin to the Aristotelian life of intellectual and moral virtue rather than the Benthamite pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain” (Acton 1994, in Mill 1861: xxix–xxx).

Mill criticizes Bentham for neglecting the role of moral regeneration in shaping human capacities for pleasure: “Whatever can be understood or whatever done without reference to moral influence, [Bentham’s] philosophy is equal to; where those influences require to be taken into account, it is at fault” (*Collected Works* x: 99–100). To address this shortcoming, Mill insists that progression toward enhanced moral sensibilities is every bit as natural as the pursuit of pleasure. If “the moral feelings are not innate, but acquired, they are not for that reason the less natural. [T]he moral faculty, if not a part of our Nature, is a natural outgrowth from it” (*Collected Works* x: 230).

The consequence of this revised utilitarianism is that pleasure is no longer a purely empirical phenomenon. It rests on psychological laws requiring that any efforts to assess utility must be “grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being” (*Collected Works* xviii: 224). Mill has been accused of injecting an *a priori* element into Bentham’s philosophy so that only highly developed individuals would be qualified to assess utility (See Cowling 1963, McCloskey 1971). However, the opposite is perhaps closer to the truth; Mill intends to define utility in such a way that direct assessments of the short-term consequences of actions can not be used to determine individual rights or social rules. Thus, utilitarian calculations must include the effects of an action or rule not only in gratifying existing desires, but in developing new capacities for satisfaction. Furthermore, since full knowledge of human potential is unattainable, only experience, in the form of diverse experiments in living, will provide reliable guidance to utility maximization over time. Although Mill does introduce an *a priori* element into Bentham’s utilitarianism, he insists that

experience and observation provide the necessary balance to a purely deductive ethics:

The worth of different modes of life should be proved practically . . . [U]nless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, [individuals] neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable.

(*Collected Works* xviii: 261, 270)

However, progress in expanding utility requires more than diversity. Mill states that development of human potential requires both an awareness of superior individual capacities and a desire to attain them. When large portions of the population are materially, intellectually, and spiritually impoverished, the opportunity and desire to experience and learn from diversity will be absent.

Another conclusion derived from the principle of progress is that social theory must recognize the adaptive evolution of institutions, values, and behaviors over time. Perhaps the reason Mill has been judged a failure as a system-builder is that his system is “complex and many-sided” and provides no universal prescriptions, but rather “principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstance might be deduced.” This relativism is necessary because “the human mind has a certain order of possible progress, in which some things must precede others.” As a result, “all questions of political institutions are relative, not absolute, and . . . different stages of human progress not only *will* have, but *ought* to have, different institutions” (Mill 1971: 99; emphasis in original).

Turning now to Mill's theory of justice, we find that utility is the ultimate criterion of justice. Mill refers to justice as “the appropriate name for certain social utilities which are vastly more important, and therefore more absolute and imperative, than any others are as a class” (*Collected Works* x: 250). However, since precise knowledge of how best to increase utility is lacking, he constructs a complex balance of subjective and objective criteria, each serving to restrain the potential damages and enable the potential benefits of the other. In a sense, justice acts as a guardian, preventing short-term subjective interests from undermining the long-term advantages of social institutions and opposing institutional changes that would interfere with legitimate subjective interests.

Mill's subjective criterion of justice is the individual interests and expectations that arise from the pursuit of self-development. However, not all interests are equally worthy of social protection; justice pertains to “certain classes of moral rules which concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly, and are therefore of more absolute obligation, than any other rules for the guidance of life” (*Collected Works* x: 255). Mill identifies three such interests: liberty, security, and equality. In recognition of the need for some degree of flexibility

in a liberal theory of justice, he acknowledges that protection of these three interests might not be equally appropriate for all stages of social development and that their meaning is historically variable. In mid-nineteenth century England, Mill holds that the prevailing interpretation of liberty encompasses the freedom to choose and act according to one's interests so long as the rights of others are not violated. Security rests on the confidence that one's expectations concerning the safety of person and property as well as the fulfillment of promises and contracts are upheld:

The moralities which protect every individual from being harmed by others, either directly or by being hindered in his freedom of pursuing his own good, are at once those which he himself has most at heart, and those which he has the strongest interest in publishing and enforcing by word and deed . . . ; it is these moralities primarily, which compose the obligations of justice.

(*Collected Works* x: 256)

For Mill, equality means equality of opportunity, equal treatment under the law, and equal standing as a citizen whose pleasures and pains are to be given the same weight as those of any other citizen. Given the conditions of mid-nineteenth century England, perfect equality should not extend to economic or political status, for Mill believes that expediency in protecting social institutions and enlarging long-term utility requires some political and economic inequality for the foreseeable future. Generally speaking, however, he places the burden of proof on the defense of hierarchical institutions and practices.

All persons are deemed to have a right to equality of treatment, except when some recognized social expediency requires the reverse. And hence all social inequalities which have ceased to be considered expedient assume the character, not of simple inexpediency, but of injustice.

(*Collected Works* x: 258)

Justice expands social utility by protecting essential individual interests in developing and refining human capacities and talents. However, justice also restrains certain anti-social interests. Individuals are expected to control their inclinations in obedience to laws established to protect the rights of others. Mill believes that this restraint contributes to social utility not only by protecting others from harm, but also by promoting the capacity for sympathy: "To be held to rigid rules of justice for the sake of others, develops the feelings and capacities which have the good of others for their object" (*Collected Works* xviii: 266).

The objective criterion in Mill's theory of justice follows from his focus on the development of individual capacities as the surest route to expanding social utility. He relies on exertion, industry, sacrifice, contribution, and effort as criteria of merit. While modern theorists might point to potential inconsistencies

among these terms, Mill glosses over these differences because all represent the exercise of capacities germane to human development. His refusal to precisely define the objective criterion also reflects a commitment to adaptability to changing circumstances. Societies at various stages of development may assess merit differently.

Mill conceives of merit not only as a backward-looking concept based on past labor, but also as forward-looking in the sense that merit should reflect the potential as well as the actual contributions of individuals. For example, an impoverished person might possess an objective claim to subsistence in order to develop the ability to make productive contributions. Children might have an objective right to educational resources despite having never worked. Savers might have a valid claim to interest income not only as recompense for the sacrifice of forbearing consumption but also in recognition of the potential for saving to fund investment and thereby contribute to economic growth and greater utility for all in the future.

Mill believes that his subjective and objective criteria of justice are potentially congruent in a liberal democratic society. The individual interests in liberty, security, and formal equality are held to be largely compatible with the institutional structure of democratic capitalism (and perhaps a democratic socialism), as is the notion of reward in accordance with productive activity. Both are also expedient in promoting utility. The protected subjective interests should promote diversity, autonomy, and self-reliance, all of which contribute to self-development. Attaching rewards to productive activity will elicit support from working citizens and provide stimulus to rising standards of living that promote individual development.

The two criteria of justice also restrain the potential excesses of both narrow self-interest and expedient public policy. In pursuing their desires, individuals are prohibited by justice from harming the protected interests of others. In addition, linking reward to productive activity will discourage individuals from pursuing trivial and inconsequential interests. Finally, policy-makers will be restrained from implementing institutional changes that infringe on protected interests or violate the association between exertion and reward. The rules of justice block direct assessments of short-run social utility as a means for determining the desirability of particular public policies. By forcing policy-makers to focus on protected interests and fairness, justice maintains the priority of human development as the surest route to long-term utility enhancement.

Mill leaves the criteria of justice somewhat vague because societies at different levels of development and with different objective circumstances will have different conceptions of justice. His belief in progress leads him to

anticipate that subjective perceptions of morality and justice will evolve over time:

The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions, by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of a universally stigmatized injustice and tyranny.

(*Collected Works* x: 259)

Moral development is possible because the sentiment of justice is not an innate or fixed instinct. It begins with “the animal desire to repel or retaliate a hurt or damage to oneself,” but this desire becomes moral only when it is “widened so as to include all persons, by the human capacity of enlarged sympathy, and the human conception of intelligent self-interest” (*Collected Works* x: 250). When the instinct for justice has been fully moralized, we shall observe:

Just persons resenting a hurt to society, though not otherwise a hurt to themselves, and not resenting a hurt to themselves, however painful, unless it be of the kind which society has a common interest with them in the repression of.

(*Collected Works* x: 249)

Applying Mill’s Theory of Justice

Mill’s theory of justice provides a framework for interpreting his pronouncements on political and economic affairs. This assertion can be supported with reference to the issues of voting rights, welfare rights, property rights, taxation, government’s role in economic life, and the question of capitalism versus socialism. In each instance, apparent inconsistencies in Mill’s writing can be shown to cohere logically with his theory of justice.

Voting Rights. Mill presents a strong argument for universal participation in politics:

[T]he only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participate; that any participation, even in the smallest public function, is useful; that the participation should everywhere be as great as the general degree of improvement of the community will allow, and that nothing less can be ultimately desirable than the admission of all to share in the sovereign power of the State.

(*Collected Works* xix: 403–404)

Universal voting rights would provide citizens the opportunity for and interest in cultivating their social feelings and knowledge, which, in turn, expand their capacities for expression and active self-development. Extending the franchise

to workers also would balance the power of property owners, preventing any single class from dominating public authority. Finally, granting women “the same rights of citizenship as men” and an “equal voice with men” would be a matter of immense “moral and social benefit” not only in liberating half the population from “intolerable domestic drudgery” but also in reducing the rate of population growth (*Collected Works* ii: 372–373).

However, Mill is led by his assessment of the objective conditions of mid-nineteenth century British society to conclude that voting rights should not be universal until workers have acquired sufficient wisdom and maturity to transcend narrow class interests and embrace the broader public interest. He fears that enfranchised workers would oppress property owners by supporting violations of legitimate rights and inexpedient reforms aimed at raising wages and reducing profits. To protect the property rights of the upper classes, Mill proposes to amplify their political power through plural voting in which more educated citizens would cast several votes. Similarly, he seeks to diminish the political power of the working class with a literacy requirement and the disenfranchisement of any person receiving public assistance.

Given these restrictions on voting rights, Mill presents a more cautious vision of voting rights than did David Ricardo a generation earlier. Whereas Mill is willing to restrict the franchise until the working class cultivates sufficient public virtue, Ricardo advocated immediate universal adult suffrage (except for those on public assistance). Moreover, while Mill defends plural voting to protect the rights of the upper classes, Ricardo held that labor and business could strike a workable alliance, based on a common enemy (the land-holding aristocracy) and a common interest in material prosperity and growth. Ricardo proposed admitting elected representatives of workers' interests into Parliament where open debate could lead to negotiated solutions to differences between capital and labor (Ricardo 1824a, b, Millgate and Stimson 1991).

Mill's theory of justice offers a plausible reconciliation of his praise for widespread political participation and his anti-democratic efforts to protect privilege and property. Justice is advanced by the developmental effects of voting rights as well as by the security of property rights. Therefore, justice calls for maximum feasible participation in the political process as well as sufficient power in the hands of property owners to block shortsighted assaults on legitimate privileges. These demands remain contradictory until workers attain sufficient understanding of the expediency of secure property rights and profitability. In the meantime, the opposing dictates of justice are balanced by excluding from the franchise those citizens least likely to have developed awareness of the public interest and through plural voting by more educated and thereby highly developed citizens. Unequal voting rights accord with justice

because they link the reward of political participation with active self-development. In Mill's words, "it is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge" (*Collected Works* xix: 478). By connecting the privilege of voting with the level of development of the individual, Mill proposes to reward people for their accomplishments and to provide incentive for future self-development. He bases plural voting on education and occupational status rather than property ownership because his theory of justice opposes any "inequality of privilege grounded on irrelevant or adventitious circumstances," and education or employment is a more relevant indicator of self-development than is property ownership (*Collected Works* xix: 478). Even the common man can accept the legitimacy of plural voting as long as "this superior influence (is) assigned on grounds which he can comprehend, and of which he is able to perceive the justice" (*Collected Works* xix: 474).

Welfare Rights and Education. Mill claims that every citizen has a right to a basic level of subsistence, placing an obligation on society to provide assistance when individuals fail to support themselves. Such assistance may take several forms. Direct public relief might be provided to persons who cannot support themselves because of age, infirmity, or disability. Public employment may be used to raise the demand for labor and thereby the wages of the working poor. Government might encourage expansion of a "class of small proprietors" by providing plots of land, tools, and fertilizer. Mill also regards colonization and emigration as policies benefiting the poor.

The right to subsistence is a corollary of the rights to liberty, security, and equality since a basic standard of living is essential for self-development. Welfare rights also derive from the justice-based connection between reward and exertion, including the potential for future efforts. Welfare may enable individuals to overcome the paralysis of poverty and to develop their active faculties in order to become contributing members of society. Moreover, Mill defends limited welfare as consistent with efficiency and growth. In a departure from classical orthodoxy, he distinguishes between rigid laws of production and the more malleable process of distribution in which "mankind" can disperse goods to "whomsoever they please, and on whatever terms" (*Collected Works* iii: 200). Although economists are nearly unanimous in criticizing Mill for his failure to perceive the role of incentives in linking production and distribution, he neither proposes nor condones arbitrary redistribution. By stating that distribution is "a matter of human institutions solely" and depends on the "laws and customs of society," Mill acknowledges that redistribution must remain within the dictates of justice in order to preserve incentives and efficiency (*Collected Works* iii: 199). His assertion of discretion in the distribution of

wealth reflects the principle of adaptive evolution and historical variability in his theory of justice. As public attitudes toward poverty, human rights, and inequality evolve, the scope for viable redistribution will change accordingly.

While insisting that impoverished individuals are entitled to a standard of living sufficient to enable personal development, Mill acknowledges that a guaranteed subsistence might be inexpedient insofar as it reduces the incentive to work. He addresses this concern by stipulating that the level of assistance must be kept below the standard of living of the lowest wage earner or that a work requirement be attached to relief. Since the working poor in Mill's era were often living at a mere subsistence level, he seeks other disincentives for welfare recipients such as disenfranchisement or limitations on procreation. Throughout his discussion of welfare rights, Mill focuses on justice and the maximization of long-term utility, acknowledging first, the human interests in security, liberty, and equality and, second, the necessity of work in lifting both individuals and society to higher levels of development.

Above all, Mill believes that the ethical criteria underlying the right to public assistance provide a persuasive rationale for "effective national education of the labouring class" (*Collected Works* ii: 374–377). Educational opportunities in mid-nineteenth century England were highly skewed toward children of aristocratic and business families, while education for children of working class and poor families was often lacking and always inferior. By failing to provide adequate public education, the state contributed directly to the social reproduction of inequality, thereby constraining the development of talents and character, fostering class antagonisms, and thwarting the extension of individual liberty and democracy.

Expansion and improvement of education, in contrast, would not only enhance skills, raise productivity and promote economic growth; such changes would reduce poverty and inequality, ease social tensions, and ultimately foster an environment conducive to the extension of democracy.

Property Rights. Mill claims that property rights are usually worthy of protection by the rules of justice. Individuals must feel secure and free to engage their property in projects conducive to their personal development and economic gain. Moreover, property is often the result of past exertions and sacrifices. Therefore, property rights are expedient in promoting productivity, efficiency, growth, and hence the expansion of personal development. Yet Mill claims that "society is fully entitled to abrogate or alter any particular right of property which on sufficient consideration it judges to stand in the way of the public good" (*Collected Works* v: 753). He is unwilling to provide blanket justification for all property rights because he believes that some have been acquired unjustly:

The social arrangements of modern Europe commenced from a distribution of property which was the result, not of just partition, or acquisition by industry, but of conquest and violence . . . The laws of property have never yet conformed to the principles on which the justification of private property rests.

(*Collected Works* x: 207)

Even more recently acquired property rights may not merit protection if they were gained without personal effort, sacrifice, or contribution. However, to establish protection for property rights against purely expedient violations based on short-term calculations of social utility, Mill proposes objective criteria for determining the legitimacy of property rights. Property is worthy of protection by the rules of justice if it is the result of and/or conducive to the development of human capacities. The consequences of this distinction between legitimate and illegitimate property rights can be seen in Mill's positions on taxation.

Taxation. The notion of diminishing marginal utility of money offers a facile justification for progressive taxation and redistribution of income to the poor. However, Mill shuns this argument because it ignores the injustice of violating property rights, breaks the link between exertion and reward, and suppresses the initiative of low-income citizens:

[T]o tax the larger incomes at a higher percentage than the smaller, is to lay a tax on industry and economy; to impose a penalty on people for having worked harder and saved more than their neighbors.

(*Collected Works* iii: 810–811)

In keeping with the subjective criterion affirming security, liberty, and equality, he favors exempting from taxation an amount of income sufficient for a basic standard of living and reducing sales taxes because of their regressivity.

While Mill generally opposes substantial income redistribution as being repressive of individual initiative, a violation of secure property rights, and inexpedient to economic growth, he does target two sites at which income might be subject to taxation without diminishing either efficiency or justice. The first site is the inheritance of wealth. Mill affirms the right to bequeath wealth, but no corresponding right to inheritance follows. Rights are based on socially validated interests and expectations, and in the case of intergenerational transmission of wealth, the expectations of one generation are extinguished at death, and the expectations of the next generation have not yet been solidified. Mill proposes an “accessions tax” to confiscate any inheritance in excess of “the means of comfortable independence” in order to disperse concentrations of wealth upon death of the owner (*Collected Works* ii: 225). He believes that prohibiting large inheritances also would have the salutary effect of providing heirs with impetus to develop and exercise their individual capacities.

The second potential site for redistributive taxation lies with rental income

derived from ownership of land and other natural resources. Taxing rent is not unjust because that income is often unrelated to personal sacrifice, efforts, or contribution. Landlords “grow richer, as it were in their sleep, without working, risking, or economizing. What claim have they, on the general principle of social justice, to this accession of riches?” (*Collected Works* iii: 819–820). Confiscating rent is also expedient since it poses no disincentive that might reduce production or efficiency. However, Mill expresses caveats about such a tax. First, landowners may make capital improvements to their land, and rents would need to be sorted out and distinguished from interest and profits. Second, a “peculiar tax on the income of any class, not balanced by taxes on other classes, is a violation of justice, and amounts to a partial confiscation” (*Collected Works* iii: 826). Mill also notes that a tax on rent would reduce land values, imposing an unfair burden on current owners. Third, landowners have developed expectations and life plans based on a future stream of income accruing to their property; thus their interest in security may establish a right to at least part of rental income. As a short-term solution to these issues, Mill proposes taxing all future increments to rent created solely by increasing demand for land. The ultimate solution would be public ownership of land, but Mill fears greater potential for injustice arising from state power than from private ownership of land, at least in the foreseeable future:

The land ought to belong to the nation at large, but I think it will be a generation or two before the progress of public intelligence and morality will permit so great a concern to be entrusted to public authorities without greater abuses than necessarily attach to private property in land.

(*Collected Works* xvii: 1702)

This quote illustrates the flexibility of Mill's theory of justice. The rules of justice cannot be abstracted from their social context; they will evolve as society and its individual members develop more fully.

Government's Role in Economic Life. Mill's position on freedom of enterprise and government intervention provides vivid illustration of his reliance on a theory of justice to synthesize morality and expediency. On one hand, he provides exceptionally strong statements in defense of free enterprise: “laissez faire . . . should be the general practice: every departure from it, unless required by some great good, is a certain evil” (*Collected Works* iii: 945). Similarly, “as a general rule, the business of life is better performed when those who have an immediate interest in it are left to take their own course, uncontrolled either by the mandate of the law or by the meddling of any public functionary” (*Collected Works* iii: 946). Mill also lauds competitive markets for eliminating or at least curbing monopolies and for providing citizens with opportunities to develop their individuality by exercising choice.

To reinforce the advantages of free markets, Mill offers scathing critiques of government intervention. He is particularly critical of “authoritative” interventions which “restrain individual free agency” (*Collected Works* iii: 937–938). To be prevented from following one’s inclinations is “always irksome,” tends to “starve the development of . . . (human) faculties,” and partakes in the “degradation of slavery.” Moreover, every expansion in governmental functions (and associated taxation) increases governmental power, raising the potential for unjust violations of individual liberty, security and equality. Mill claims that most things are “worse done” by government than by interested individuals left to themselves because “people understand their own business and their own interests better and care for them more than the government does, or can be expected to do.” Moreover, even if government were superior in capacities and information to any one individual, it cannot possess knowledge of the variety of individual interests and talents and therefore “must be inferior to all the individuals of the nation taken together” (*Collected Works* iii: 941–942). In many arenas of economic life, therefore, governmental action is likely to be inferior to free enterprise in contributing to productivity and material prosperity.

However, Mill also highlights other forms of government action in which potentially adverse effects on liberty, security, or equality are negligible. Government may advise, provide information, or establish public agencies to supplement private arrangements. For example, public schools leave individuals free to choose private education, so “there is no infringement of liberty, no irksome or degrading restraint” (except for the compulsion of taxation). In such cases, “one of the principal objections” to government action is “then absent” (*Collected Works* iii: 939).

Having opened the door for a legitimate role for government, Mill relies on his theory of justice to delineate its proper scope. Regulation of economic activity potentially falls within the purview of legitimate government action because manufacturing and commerce have public consequences:

[T]rade is a social act. Whoever undertakes to sell any description of goods to the public, does what affects the interest of other persons, and of society in general; and thus his conduct, in principle, comes within the jurisdiction of society . . . [T]he so-called doctrine of free trade . . . rests on grounds different from . . . the principle of individual liberty.

(*Collected Works* xviii: 293)

Whereas the principle of liberty is based on the injustice of violating individual rights, such moral protection does not necessarily extend to economic agents. Mill bases his case for *laissez faire* on grounds of expediency rather than justice:

Restrictions of trade, or on production for the purposes of trade, are indeed restraints; and all restraint qua restraint, is an evil: but the restraints in question affect only that part of conduct which society is competent to restrain, and are wrong solely because they do not really produce the results which it is desired to produce by them.

(*Collected Works* xviii: 293)

However, certain categories of government activity are neither authoritarian nor inexpedient and these form the basis for Mill's fairly deep and broad departures from the general rule of *laissez faire*. In addition to advocating public education and limited welfare programs, he notes the possibility that government may be more effective than private enterprise in undertaking large-scale projects: "Whatever, if left to spontaneous agency, can only be done by joint-stock associations, will often be as well, and sometimes better, done by the state" (*Collected Works* iii: 954). Public goods constitute another legitimate rationale for government action:

In the particular circumstances of a given age or nation, there is scarcely anything really important to the general interest, which it may not be desirable, or even necessary, that the government should take upon itself, not because private individuals cannot effectually perform it, but because they *will not*.

(*Collected Works* iii: 970; italics added)

Mill also recognizes instances in which individual action cannot bring about widely sought changes. For example, a shorter workweek might be favored by all workers and might increase social utility, but each worker individually is powerless to negotiate over hours. Only government can express the collective interest of society in revising standard hours of labor.

Mill's position on government intervention is based on a synthesis of morality and expediency provided by his theory of justice. Individual rights to liberty, security, and equality provide an initial bulwark against encroachments by public authority, particularly for those self-directed actions conducive to personal development. However, because economic activity affects the well being of others, it may potentially be regulated without violating the rules of justice. The range of legitimate interventionist policies is delimited by three criteria. First, they should not significantly impair efficiency and long-term economic growth because Mill believes that human development requires higher standards of living for the working class. Second, they should be moral in the sense that they do not violate individual rights to liberty, security, and equality as interpreted by a particular society. Third, when efficiency and morality come into conflict, the final arbiter is always the expansion of long-run social utility. Justice consists of assessing the relative contributions to social utility of both

economic efficiency and the development of individual capacities and aspirations. Government intervention will accord with the rules of justice when it enlarges long-run social utility either by improving the efficiency of the market or by protecting legitimate individual interests from the operation of the market. Regulations may justly circumscribe those business practices (for example, unsafe or unhealthy working conditions) whose adverse effects on human development outweigh their contribution to economic development.

Capitalism versus Socialism. Mill is more sympathetic to socialism than any other liberal theorist of the nineteenth century. Some interpreters have doubted his sincerity, claiming that his support for cooperatives was a tactical ploy to diffuse working class dissent (Davis 1985, Schwartz 1972). However, Mill's theory of justice sheds light on his ambivalence about economic systems. He is strongly attracted to the institution of private property because of its potential conformance to both the objective criterion of justice linking reward to exertion or sacrifice and the subjective criterion establishing the preeminence of security and liberty. However, Mill finds the existing pattern of property rights and income to be morally repugnant: "The very idea of distributive justice, or any proportionality between success and merit or between success and exertion, is in the present state of society so manifestly chimerical as to be relegated to the regions of romance" (*Collected Works* v: 714).

Mill further condemns capitalism for breeding egotism and class conflict as well as hampering individual development by placing the majority of the population in a subordinate status with insufficient opportunities for personal development. Capitalism also represses development because when the pursuit of wealth "becomes the main object of [a person's] life, it almost invariably happens that his sympathies and feeling of interest become incapable of going much beyond himself and his family" (*Collected Works* xii: 32). Ultimately, Mill avers, "the industrial economy which divides society absolutely into two portions . . . is neither fit for, nor capable of infinite duration" (*Collected Works* iii: 896).

However, Mill has strong concerns about the potential injustice and inexpediency of socialism. He fears that socialized property could slow economic growth by discouraging risk-taking, innovation, and effort. He also expresses concern that individuality, the wellspring of personal development, could be crushed by conformity. Moreover, he criticizes what today would be called centralized planning as potentially tyrannical and inefficient due to its tendency to supersede competition. Yet Mill is fascinated by the potential of socialism to end the conflict between classes, to broaden human interests, and to facilitate the development of more highly evolved capacities. He proposes a process by which a form of socialism might demonstrate these virtues without

revolution or tyranny. As economic prosperity and education enable individuals to develop a wider range of capacities, the most highly evolved persons will refuse to submit themselves to the authoritarian social relations of capitalist enterprises. Instead, they might initiate cooperative associations, with workers "collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves" (*Collected Works* iii: 775). Highly developed workers will be attracted to these associations by opportunities to exercise capacities such as cooperation and public-mindedness. Left with only the most underdeveloped workers, capitalist firms will become competitively disadvantaged. The owners of these firms might cede personal authority, simply lend their capital to workers for interest payments, and eventually settle for a terminable annuity. Mill describes this spontaneous evolution of capitalism into cooperative socialism as "the nearest approach to social justice, and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee" (*Collected Works* iii: 794). To encourage experiments in this type of socialism, Mill favors legal and financial incentives for the formation of cooperative associations. He envisions these associations competing against capitalist firms, with the best organization prevailing. These miniature experiments provide the only reliable evidence of the feasibility of socialism, and, if they fail, there will be "no risk, either personal or pecuniary, to any except those who try them" (*Collected Works* ii: 213–214).

CONCLUSION

Mill's overriding goal is expansion of social utility through the development of individual capacities and economic prosperity. However, since certain knowledge of the optimal strategies for accomplishing this goal is beyond both sensory perception and human reason, he constructs a theory of justice to block those actions or policies likely to impede long-term utility maximization. The apparent inconsistencies in Mill's writings reflect his recognition of the potential for both justice and injustice in fundamental social values and institutions. For example, equality provides individuals with sufficient resources to develop their capacities but may also suppress initiative and effort. Private property assures security and liberty for owners but may also create class conflict and unearned income. Liberty establishes a sphere of autonomous action within which individuals are able to develop themselves but also carries the potential for violating the rights of others. In each such instance, the rules of justice are intended to protect the positive aspects of a social value or institution while curbing negative consequences.

Mill's objective criterion of justice leads him to support unequal privileges when they correspond to relevant inequalities of merit. In the economic sphere, the criterion of merit is exertion broadly defined to include effort, sacrifice, achievement, and contribution. In the political realm, merit is based on level of personal development as measured by education and range of experience. Yet in both politics and economics, Mill opposes the existing distribution of property rights and education as the measures of merit. If justice is to promote long-term utility maximization, it must also protect the interests of citizens in gaining a secure base for autonomous self-development. In other words, merit must be enlarged to include the potential for future personal development and contributions, and therefore certain privileges should be extended regardless of past achievements. In the economy, the right to subsistence should be guaranteed for every person. In politics, the right to vote should be extended to every literate, self-supporting adult citizen.

Although Mill relies on both the aesthetic pursuit of individual excellence and the high-minded ideals of social reformers as sources of social progress, he recognizes that these motives also contain the potential for injustice. Without criteria of justice to guide the pursuit of individual interests, citizens may violate the rights of others. Similarly, rules of justice constrain social reformers from promoting institutional changes that, however expedient in attaining short-term goals, might suppress long-term utility maximization. For Mill, the criterion of right is not the immediate utilitarian consequences of an act, but rather the effect on citizens' interest in and ability to develop new capacities for utility. He is concerned less with maximizing the satisfaction of existing interests than with developing more highly evolved interests that lead to greater utility in the future.

Mill recognizes the complexity of human existence and the conflicting value commitments experienced by individuals. Humans are engaged in both being and becoming. As beings, they pursue fulfillment of their desires. However, they simultaneously seek to become more highly developed persons with different desires and therefore are receptive to education and guidance. More importantly, the ability to develop higher capacities is a function of the quality of social institutions and the level of economic development. Mill treats individual interests as both an effect and cause of social institutions. Well-designed institutions can enlarge the sentiment of justice among citizens, thereby promoting the development of higher capacities and social utility.

However, the effectiveness of laws and public policy depends on the level of development of citizens. Abrupt institutional reforms are likely to fail because citizens have not yet developed capacities to function within the new environment. Changes in consciousness must precede significant institutional

reforms, but, paradoxically, institutional reforms are a key element in changing consciousness. The only way to break out of this paradox is to encourage small experimental reforms that provide opportunities to assess consequences without disrupting social stability. Through this learning process, society and its individual members are able to progress to higher levels of development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Professor Hans E. Jensen for providing many thoughtful suggestions and critical comments and to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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