

PHIL 202: Ethics Core Course
TH 12:30-3:30pm, H&SS 7077
Winter 2005; David O. Brink
Topic: Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy
Office: H&SS 8062
Office Hours: M 11am-noon and by appt.
Email: dbrink@ucsd.edu

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was the most famous and influential British philosopher of the nineteenth century. He was one of the last systematic philosophers, making significant contributions in logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, and social theory. He was also an important public figure, articulating the liberal platform, pressing for various liberal reforms, and serving in Parliament. This seminar will focus on Mill's moral and political philosophy. Indeed, our focus will be quite selective. We will concentrate on Mill's two most popular and best known works – Utilitarianism (1861) and On Liberty (1859) – though we will draw on other texts when this sheds light on our interpretation of these two texts, and we will conclude by looking at how Mill applies his utilitarian and liberal principles to issues of sexual equality in The Subjection of Women (1869). Our goals will be to try to reconstruct and assess Mill's defense of utilitarian and liberal principles and to understand his contribution to the utilitarian and liberal traditions.

Mill was raised in the tradition of Philosophical Radicalism, made famous by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), John Austin (1790-1859), and his father James Mill (1773-1836), which applied utilitarian principles in a self-conscious and systematic way to issues of institutional design and social reform. Utilitarianism assesses actions and institutions in terms of their effects on human happiness and enjoins us to perform actions and design institutions so that they promote – in one formulation, maximize -- human happiness. Utilitarianism was a progressive doctrine historically, because **it is universal in scope** – insisting that everyone's happiness matters – and because **its conception of impartiality is egalitarian** – insisting that everyone's happiness matters equally. As such, the Radicals' application of utilitarian principles to social institutions tended to challenge traditional institutions of class and privilege.

As he documents in his Autobiography (1873), Mill was groomed from birth by his father to become the ultimate Victorian intellectual and utilitarian reformer. While Mill followed the strict intellectual regimen laid down by his father for many years, the intellectual and emotional stress that he was asked to shoulder eventually proved too much. He suffered a profound intellectual and emotional crisis in the period 1826-1830. Mill's recovery was assisted by friendships he formed with Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Coleridge, who introduced him to ideas and texts from the Romantic and Conservative traditions.

Though Mill never renounced the liberal and utilitarian tradition and mission that he inherited from his father, his mental crisis and recovery greatly influenced his interpretation of this tradition. He became critical of the moral psychology of Bentham and his father and of some of the social theory underlying their plans for reform. It's arguable that Mill tends to downplay the significance of his innovations and to underestimate the intellectual discontinuities between himself and his father. One of

our concerns will be to try to gauge the extent of the transformation Mill brings to utilitarian and liberal principles.

In reconstructing the central elements of Mill's moral philosophy, we will examine his conception of happiness and the role it assigns to higher pleasures; his conception of moral principles and his theories of duty, justice and rights; his proof of the principle of utility; and his conception of moral motivation. In reconstructing the central elements of Mill's liberalism, we will examine the status of the harm principle and the principles underlying his opposition to paternalism, legal moralism, and censorship.

Much of Mill's philosophical significance lies in his attempt to synthesize the insights of different traditions – such as the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions, the Liberal and Conservative traditions, and the utilitarian and natural rights traditions. But synthesis often brings the risk of inconsistency. We will need to address various questions about Mill's overall consistency, such as whether his perfectionist elements in his moral and political theory can be reconciled with his commitment to hedonism, whether he has a consistent conception of duty or right action, whether he really does think that harm to others is a necessary and sufficient reason for restricting liberty, and whether his apparently categorical liberal principles are compatible with utilitarianism.

We will conclude our analysis of Mill's utilitarian and liberal sympathies by examining their application to issues of sexual equality in The Subjection of Women. Though it is hard to believe that the liberal principles articulated in On Liberty would have struck most of Mill's contemporaries as uncontroversial, it is not unreasonable to claim that the true revolutionary import of those principles was not clear until the publication of The Subjection of Women. There Mill argues eloquently for liberal reforms that extend the franchise to women, that liberalize divorce law, and that expand opportunities for women's education. One question we will need to ask is whether the consistent application of Millian principles would have supported further reforms in the relation between the sexes that Mill did not envision, such as a redistribution of the division of labor between the sexes.

FORMAT

I'll be presenting material in a way that aims to impose useful analytical structure on the readings and issues. Hopefully, this structure will facilitate a discussion of our interpretive options, the merits of rival interpretations, and the systematic plausibility of Mill's principles and arguments. So I expect my commentary to be liberally seasoned with discussion. Though I have taught our two main texts before and have published material on Mill's moral and political philosophy, my views are unsettled and tentative on many points. I look forward to learning a lot from seminar members.

REQUIREMENTS

Students registered for the seminar are required to write one short paper, approximately 6-8 pages, and one longer paper in two drafts, with the revision being approximately 14-16 pages. The first paper is due Thursday, February 3; the first draft of the second paper is due Thursday, March 3, and it will be returned with comments Thursday, March 10; the revision will be due Thursday, March 17. The first paper will be worth 35% of the overall grade; the second paper will be worth 50% of the overall grade; and seminar participation will be worth 15% of the overall grade.

BOOKS

Mill was a prolific writer. There are 33 volumes in his Collected Works, ed. by J. Robson and published by the University of Toronto Press, which is now out of print. Unfortunately, there is no handy and affordable edition of his principal works in moral and political philosophy. Instead, there are many editions of each of these works. I have ordered the following required and recommended texts, which should be available from the campus bookstore.

Required:

- The Classical Utilitarians, ed. J. Troyer (Hackett, 2003). This includes
 - Bentham's Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (selections)
 - Bentham's The Rationale of Reward (selections)
 - Mill's Utilitarianism
 - Mill's On Liberty
 - Mill's "Remarks on Mr. Bentham's Philosophy"
 - Mill's A System of Logic (selections)
- John Stuart Mill, On the Subjection of Women, ed. S. Okin (Hackett, 1988).

Recommended:

- John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, ed. R. Crisp (Oxford, 1998).
- David Lyons, Rights, Welfare, and Mill's Moral Theory (Oxford, 1994).
- Mill's Utilitarianism: Critical Essays, ed. D. Lyons (Roman & Littlefield, 1997).
- Mill's On Liberty: Critical Essays, ed. G. Dworkin (Roman & Littlefield, 1997).

READINGS

Required and recommended readings are listed on the Syllabus. Wherever possible, passages from Mill's texts will be identified by appeal to natural divisions in the text, such as chapters, sections, and/or paragraphs.

PHILOSOPHY DISTRIBUTION CREDIT

Graduate students in philosophy should know that this seminar can count toward satisfaction of either the history requirement (nineteenth century) or the ethics requirement, but not both.