



The Social Liberalism of John Stuart Mill

Alain Anquetil

If a short list of keywords had to be proposed in order to explain why John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was a great liberal thinker, it would certainly include *utility*, *liberty*, and *equality*. These concepts express his view of liberalism, which lies between classical liberalism and a social, if not socialist, vision, calling for a significant intervention of the state. Apart from his insights in many domains of the individual, economic, social, and political life, Mill's specific position in the history of liberalism justifies to devote particular attention to his work.

Mill is well known for his defense of the principle of utility, in the wake of the work of James Mill (1773–1836), his father, and Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), a friend of his father, who both shaped John Stuart's education. Mill propounds a more personal version of this principle in *Utilitarianism*, published in 1863, where he distinguishes between inferior and higher pleasures, defines happiness and connects the principle of utility with the development of higher faculties of mind and self-realization or, as Mill says, "the cultivation of nobleness of character" (CW X: 214).¹

A. Anquetil (✉)

ESSCA School of Management, Boulogne-Billancourt, France

e-mail: alain.anquetil@essca.fr

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Liberty gives its name to another famous book published in 1859, *On Liberty*, which has been influenced by Mill's wife, Harriet Taylor (1807–1858). The importance of individual liberty within society, especially the “very simple principle” (CW XVIII: 223), as he calls it, that everyone should be free provided that no harm is done to other people (the “harm principle,” which is not an expression due to Mill), has become a seminal text for liberal thinkers.

Harriet Taylor is also said to have strongly influenced at least some parts of the *Principles of Political Economy* (although the depth of her influence is controversial). Published in 1848, the first version, which became immediately popular—“It was, from the first, continually cited and referred to as an authority,” Mill says in his *Autobiography* (CW I: 243)—was originally dedicated to Harriet, who was married at the time—Mill met her in 1830 and they were involved in a close but platonic relationship until the death of her husband in 1849. Although Mill is considered as a classical economist, classified in the same category as Smith, Ricardo, Malthus or Say, he was sympathetic to socialist ideas. He did not adhere to the abolition of property rights or to the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat, but he defended, jointly with his wife and especially in the second version of the *Principles*, published in 1849, the importance of achieving social justice and, to this end, the necessary intervention of the state, for example in the economy and in the field of education. This is one reason why *equality* can be viewed as a third keyword in the list, all the more so as it appears, in *The subjection of women* (1869)—another text influenced by Harriet—in the form of a claim for a “perfect equality” between men and women.

A lot has been written about Mill's views. The reader will have no difficulty in finding descriptions, explanations, and analyses. Not only have Mill's claims largely been dissected and subjected to critical scrutiny, but their coherence has also been questioned. This was the case with regard to the effects of the evolution of Mill's thought, for example between the successive versions of the *Principles of Political Economy*,² the nature of his liberalism, the importance he gives to the foundation of a “religion of humanity” (CW X: 328), separated from Christianity,³ or the relationships between his view of utilitarianism and his doctrine of liberty.

Central to the present chapter are both the liberal socialist perspective which has been defended by Mill and the idea that this original perspective may be enlightened by utility, liberty and equality.⁴ Mill does not propose a comprehensive political, social, and moral theory based upon this triad of concepts, nor does he present complete arguments to solve the potential conflicts between them. But utility, liberty and equality, taken together, provide direct (and suggestive) insights into Mill's thought and help to explain why Mill can be considered, even with our modern eyes, as a great liberal thinker.

This is the case in the economic realm. Admittedly, utility, liberty and equality do not exclusively belong to economy, but Mill did not consider that economy was a separated realm of human affairs. Rather, it was part of social sciences as a whole. In the *Principles of Political Economy*, he says that he “treated Political Economy not as a thing by itself, but as a fragment of a greater whole; a branch of Social Philosophy” (CW I: 243). He adds that this particular branch of Social Philosophy is “so interlinked with all the other branches, that its conclusions, even in its own peculiar province, are only true conditionally, subject to interference and counteraction from causes not directly within its scope” (CW I: 243).

The present chapter is divided into five sections. The first is devoted to the importance Mill attributes to the formation of the human character. Sections two to four deal with Mill's accounts of utility, liberty and equality. Their meaning is described, as well as their conceptual relationships. The fifth and last section addresses Mill's liberal socialist perspective, which is mainly expounded in his *Principles of Political Economy*.

The Formation of the Human Character

Let us start with the importance Mill attached to the human character. As strange as it may sound, understanding what Mill says about it is key to his insights on utility, liberty and equality.

A short biographical note is useful here. It regards the education Mill received. As Maurice Cranston says, “James Mill [John Stuart's father] did not send his eldest child to any school; he taught him at home following a strenuous plan of education devised by himself and Bentham to produce

the perfect utilitarian” (1987: 83). James Mill’s belief that “education can do everything,”⁵ in particular that a right education depends on the circumstances in which children are reared, explains that he “was determined that his first-born son’s character would be carefully molded and shaped by the right circumstances, that is, those that he deemed right and good” (Ball 2000: 33–34). In his *System of Logic*, John Stuart said of the “Necessitarian”—a thinker who endorses a deterministic account of human action—that he believes that “his education and circumstances have so moulded his character, that nothing can now prevent him from feeling and acting in a particular way, or at least that no effort of his own can hinder it” (CW VIII: 840). Later, Mill observed that his education had not prepared him to act as a full agent: “The education [my father] gave me was, considered in itself, much more fitted for training me to *know* than to *do*,” and that, “[having] been, through childhood, under the constant rule of a strong will [...] I was so much accustomed to expect to be told what to do, either in the form of direct command or of rebuke for not doing it, that I acquired a habit of leaving my responsibility as a moral agent to rest on my father, my conscience never speaking to me except by his voice” (CW I: 613). But beyond this observation, he was convinced that human beings have the ability to shape their own character, for example that they may alter their habits and desires. Such an ability is a condition of moral freedom: “[T]his feeling, of our being able to modify our own character *if we wish*, is itself the feeling of moral freedom which we are conscious of” (CW VIII: 841). In Mill’s view, forming one’s own character is not a mere possibility, but a faculty which is common to all human beings.

Why is this a key to understanding Mill’s account of utility, liberty, and equality? Because human happiness, which is a crucial component of the principle of utility, includes the ability of persons to cultivate their character and pursue self-directed life plans; because the cultivation of one’s own character presupposes that specific conditions prevail in society—conditions which provide a great amount of liberty to citizens; and because liberty should be distributed equally to each member of the society.

Utility

Mill proposes a definition of utility which is rather similar to Jeremy Bentham's "Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number" (1962: 227): "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (CW X: 210). What immediately follows shows that Mill is, like Bentham, a hedonist, as he considers that happiness depends on the search of pleasure: "By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure" (CW X: 210).

But Mill's conception of pleasure is quite different from the one professed by Bentham. Indeed, Mill draws a distinction between two categories of pleasures. There are inferior pleasures, which human beings share with animals, and higher pleasures, which stem from human "faculties more elevated than the animal appetites" (CW X: 210) and have typically an intellectual nature. The latter may be distinguished from the former empirically, through experience. Each type of pleasure corresponds to one mode of living—one "manner of existence," in Mill's words (CW X: 211). And when a human being has had the opportunity to experience pleasures of a high quality, then he "unquestionably" tends to prefer them to lower pleasures, even if those are more difficult to attain. The process is, so to speak, non-reversible, because a person whose noble faculties are well-developed could "never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence" (CW X: 212). It would be contrary to the "sense of dignity" which grows with those faculties. The point is expressed by Mill's famous statement: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (CW X: 212).

In Mill's view, cultivating one's character implies that one prefers a manner of existence based upon the search for higher pleasures. And this search is coherent with the principle of utility. To be sure, utilitarianism promotes the "greatest amount of happiness altogether" (CW X: 213),⁶ and it is not obvious at all that a person enjoying a noble character should be happier than people enjoying lower pleasures. But Mill affirms that, due to the human preference for higher pleasures, a noble person (i.e.

an educated person, having ideals, admirable qualities of character, and a sense of dignity) will increase other people's happiness. As a result, he says, utilitarianism "could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others" (CW X: 214).

The utilitarian criterion is not to be applied by anyone in any situation of choice. Because many ordinary decisions and actions are short-sighted and limited in scope, it would be unrealistic to believe that the search of the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number should always be taken into account. Mill states it this way: "It is a misapprehension of the utilitarian mode of thought, to conceive it as implying that people should fix their minds upon so wide a generality as the world, or society at large" (CW X: 220). However, they should, under all circumstances, refrain from acting against the public interest, even if their decision is a private one.

In *Utilitarianism*, Mill depicts a vision of man which is at odds with the *homo economicus* that he considered, 15 years before, in the *Principles of Political Economy*.⁷ Yet, in Chapter 4, Mill deals with the desire for money, observing that "the love of money is not only one of the strongest moving forces of human life, but [that] money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself" (CW X: 236). However, this does not imply that Mill considers that, whether in life in general or in the economic sphere in particular, people lack or lose sight of moral virtues. The desire of money for itself is the result of a law of association and of habit. It is an "acquired desire" which leads people to believe that money is an end in itself, while it is only in reality a "means to happiness" (CW X: 235). But the mean has not become an end in itself: it is only a part of another end. This is what Mill means by saying that "in being desired for its own sake it is, however, desired as *part* of happiness" (CW X: 236). In a nutshell, Mill's principle of utility does not imply that the search for money and the search for virtue are incompatible: "The utilitarian standard, while it tolerates and approves those other acquired desires, up to the point beyond which they would be more injurious to the general happiness than promotive of it, enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to the greatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness"

(CW X: 237). Thus, Mill's vision of man is that of a virtuous person who cares both for his well-being and for others' well-being.

This leads us to another reason why Mill's vision of man is inconsistent with the *homo economicus*, i.e. the idea that human beings have natural sympathies. They are disposed to care for each other. Mill states that "social feelings of mankind" (CW X: 231), which include, in particular, "the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures" (CW X: 231), are at the foundation of utilitarianism as a moral doctrine. His assertion that "the social state is at once so natural, so necessary, and so habitual to man, that, except in some unusual circumstances or by an effort of voluntary abstraction, he never conceives himself otherwise than as a member of a body" (CW X: 231), reflects his rejection of the idea that human beings would be purely selfish creatures.

Liberty

I now turn to Mill's conception of liberty. I begin this section by evoking his account of the mission of a good government—which is, in Mill's perspective, a *representative* government. A good government aims at improving the quality of people's lives from material, intellectual and moral perspectives. Now, this goal implies that each member of society enjoy liberty. In order to make it clear that liberty is an essential condition of the workings of any advanced society,⁸ Mill considers the case of an enlightened despot. He admits that a society may be governed by such a system of despotism, but, for the sake of human development and liberty, it ought to be temporary and conditional: "I am far from condemning, in cases of extreme exigency, the assumption of absolute power in the form of a dictatorship[...] But its acceptance, even for a time strictly limited, can only be excused, if [...] the dictator employs the whole power he assumes in removing the obstacles which debar the nation from the enjoyment of freedom" (CW XIX: 403).

But how does Mill define freedom? When, in respectively *The Principles of Political Economy*, *On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill refers to freedom, he seems at first hand to mean *doing what one desires*⁹—"Liberty consists in doing what one desires," Mill says,

almost incidentally, in *Liberty* (CW XVIII: 294). However, as Bernard Williams argues, Mill “cannot quite mean this: he must at any rate mean the capacity to do what one desires [...] This is an idea of liberty as ability or capacity” (2001: 7). Furthermore, *doing what one desires* should be complemented by a clause specifying the nature of the desires which constitute the motives of the act. Not only did Mill not ignore the moral value of such motives, which Montesquieu described one century before,¹⁰ but he also insisted on the importance of deliberation and good judgment. Being “qualified to form a judgment” (CW XIX: 510) is a consequence of freedom and intellectual ability, and this is an ideal that each member of a free society should have the opportunity to realize. Chapter 2 of *Liberty* and other passages of this book refer to the effect of the liberty of discussion on the formation of good judgment and the cultivation of individual characters. The main justification of such a liberty is the search for truth. In this context, even one single opinion, however strange it might seem, should be considered—assuming that it were false, it would make the force of the presently true opinion more salient.¹¹

Quite importantly in a liberal perspective, Mill also connects freedom with the development of individuality, i.e. the cultivation of character and the realization of one’s potentialities. Mill maintains “that freedom is the essential condition to the growth of individuality in its richest diversity,” as Dorothy Fosdick indicates (1939: 155).

Such a position has moral, social and political consequences. It implies a defence of pluralism, which refers here to the multiplicity of ways of living—there are as many ways of living as the number of people within the society. It also implies tolerance towards others’ personal choices with regard to their plans of life. Such a tolerance must be shared by each member of the society, and it should be embedded within social institutions. Mill’s idea of liberty as ability or capacity supposes that state’s interference with individual liberty be reduced to a minimum. In the first chapter of *Liberty*, he asserts that what he calls a “very simple principle” is “entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion” (CW XVIII: 223). The simple principle states that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of

a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (CW XVIII: 223)—which has been called the “harm principle.” To defend his position, Mill appeals to a separation between self-regarding actions and other-regarding actions,¹² considering that, in the former, the individual should be absolutely free. In the private sphere, any intervention of the state is prohibited.

This view has led to considerable discussions, relative, for example, to the scope of the concept of harm (does an offence to other’s beliefs count as a harm?¹³), to the difficulty in separating self- and other-regarding actions, or to the nature of the impediments to the individual’s exercise of liberty. As to the latter objection, Charles Taylor observes that obstacles to liberty not only include external constraints (originating from the government and from society¹⁴), but also internal, psychological obstacles, such as “lack of awareness, or false consciousness, or repression” (1979: 176).¹⁵ If Mill, like many modern tenants of liberty, adheres to “the post-Romantic idea that each person’s form of self-realization is original to him/her, and can therefore only be worked out independently” (1979: 176), he should consider the possibility that one fails in realizing one’s own individuality.

It should be noted that, in Mill’s view, liberty is first of all opposed to the love of power, not to external constraints or psychological obstacles. The love of power is the worst evil. It is the opposite of liberty. Mill puts it unequivocally in a passage of the *Considerations on Representative Government* where he also refers to equality: “[T]he love of power is the most evil passion of human nature [...] With the love of liberty it is wholly the reverse” (CW XIX: 610).

Mill is a defender of individual liberty. But is this commitment sufficient to qualify him as a liberal? Not yet. What is needed in addition is an argument with regard to the relationship between liberty and both utility and equality, and to the function of the state. Let us deal first with the relationship between liberty and utility.

It seems obvious that utility and liberty may be antagonistic. This is due to the possibility that individual liberties might be sacrificed for the sake of utility. Under some circumstances, actually, maximizing the well-being of all might require the suppression of some individual freedoms. What is Mill’s position about this question? The answer refers to what he says about the necessary conditions for the enforcement of utility and liberty.

In *Utilitarianism*, Mill observes that the principle of utility, considered as a political ideal, is likely to be enforced only if certain social conditions prevail, especially the level of education provided in the society. As Catherine Audard says, these conditions should be such as to “enable, if not everyone, at least a vast majority of people, to achieve their full potential, which is Mill’s definition of happiness” (1999: 72). And in *Liberty*, he asserts that the development of freedom requires a certain degree of intellectual and moral maturity.

This could suggest that Mill eludes the possibility of a hard conflict between utility and liberty, as both depend on a common cause, i.e. specific social conditions. However, Mill justifies liberty by utility. He argues that liberty contributes to utility so far as it is controlled by the harm principle. In *Liberty*, Mill views “utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” (CW XVIII: 224), adding that “it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being” (CW XVIII: 224). He emphasizes that “those interests [...] authorize the subjection of individual spontaneity to external control, only in respect to those actions of each, which concern the interest of other people” (CW XVIII: 224). Thus, the subordination of liberty to utility is only justified by the harm principle. However, in *Utilitarianism*, Mill puts forward another and more vague justification, which depends on the general opinion about what is better for society. The general opinion could be the reason why the right of equality of treatment applied to freedom would be overridden: “All persons are deemed to have a *right* to equality of treatment, except when some recognised social expediency requires the reverse” (CW X: 258).

In short, Mill’s account of utility and liberty supposes a high degree of maturity on the part of the members of society. They should have developed psychological dispositions allowing them both to define their own plan of life and to accept that other people do the same, the latter requirement being supported by human natural sympathies. This form of pluralism is a key feature of liberalism.

Equality

What has been said so far logically entails expectations about equality. These expectations are somewhat more elaborate than the “Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one” (CW X: 257), which is the egalitarian formula of Bentham’s utilitarianism. Mill’s view about the importance of human development entails that if any member of society should be allowed to develop their full potential, then they should have a right to liberty. And this right should be distributed equally, both for reasons related to Mill’s defence of the individual’s good and, at a collective level, for utilitarian reasons, because, as has been said before, freedom of discussion leads to the discovery of truth, and thus to human progress and happiness. Such an equal distribution has direct effects on the workings of society, as it supposes and requires that everyone has appropriate and sufficient means to develop and cultivate one’s faculties. These means suppose the implementation of public rules, which apply to all citizens with impartiality and justice, because no individual—and no class of individuals—should be in a privileged position, or, conversely, in a disadvantageous position, to develop one’s talents.

These statements are typical of liberalism. Guido de Ruggiero wrote that “liberalism [...] implies not only the feeling of liberty but the idea of equality” (1961: 51). Thus, liberal thinkers do not defend liberties alone. They also insist upon the importance of specific political conditions guaranteeing freedom, i.e. “the progressive implementation of the rule of law, state’s commitment to impartiality and impersonal modes of control,” in Monique Canto-Sperber’s words (2006: 19).¹⁶ She adds that “no one may have legitimate expectations with regard to self-preservation and protection of one’s property without being sure that one’s demands will be treated fairly, that one will be able to appeal to a public rule applicable to all” (2006: 19).

How does Mill respond to these expectations? The ideas of equal opportunities and equal treatment are part of his philosophy. Isaiah Berlin develops that point with respect to freedom of expression: “If I am permitted to read or write or express my opinion freely it is wrong, unjust, unfair, etc., that others should not be permitted to do so too” (1955–1956: 304). But equality should not have a *deleterious* impact on the pluralism of ways of

living. It would be the case if claims for equality led to social uniformity. Mill feared, in his time marked by the pressure of Victorian society more than the interference of the British government in private lives,¹⁷ that “the general tendency of things throughout the world [were] to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind” (CW XVIII: 268).

This quotation provides the occasion for another bibliographical digression. When Mill suffered a “mental depression” (CW I: 148) in 1826 at the age of 20, he turned to poetry and the Romantics. He discovered other ways of thinking, far removed from the rationalist and empirical traditions which had formed the backdrop of his strict upbringing. The following statement illustrates Mill’s deep concern for the development of individuality and, indirectly, for the “eccentricity of conduct” (CW XVIII: 265): “Every great poet, every poet who has extensively or permanently influenced mankind, has been a great thinker, has had his mind full of thoughts, derived not merely from passive sensibility, but from trains of reflection, from observation, analysis, and generalization” (CW I: 413). When writing these lines, perhaps Mill thought that those qualities could be attributed to him. Actually, the circumstances of his life, combined with his great intellectual abilities, led him to develop his character and to acquire the features of a type of person in which he was particularly interested, namely the genius.

Two last points deserve attention with regard to Mill’s account of equality. The first one deals with “perfect equality”, a phrase he uses at the beginning of *The Subjection of Women* (CW XXI: 261). Indeed, he defends the idea “that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (CW XXI: 261). Mill’s commitment to a strict equality between men and women is apparent in his attack against the despotism of the head of the family and its impact on education and, consequently, on human and social progress. He called for a change in the regulation of family relationships, especially in the balance of power between its members. According to him, the human family should reflect the political democratic ideal. Of course, such a view is connected with the advent of the free society he deemed

desirable, as Maria Morales insightfully observes: “The family also should become a democratic institution,” i.e. “an association where people first are trained in the virtues of freedom” (1996: 196).

The second point concerns political economy, i.e. “the science relating to the moral or psychological laws of the production and distribution of wealth” (CW IV: 318). It has been developed in the chapter *On the Probable Future of the Labouring Classes*. Mill discusses two ways in which workers may be treated by those who own the means of production. The first one, which he called the “theory of dependence” (CW III: 759), expresses a dependency of workers upon their employers. It implies that they are seen as pure means and “treated like children” (CW III: 763), i.e. without taking their individuality into account, nor their ability to act autonomously. The second way is the “theory of self-dependence” (CW III: 759)—Mill’s preferred theory. According to it, workers and employers or owners should be on an equal footing. And it goes without saying that, if this was the case, then economic relations would be deeply transformed, as Mill explains: “Whatever advice, exhortation, or guidance is held out to the labouring classes, must henceforth be tendered to them as equals, and accepted by them with their eyes open. The prospect of the future depends on the degree in which they can be made rational beings” (CW III: 763). Thus, in his view, equality is neither wishful thinking, nor an empty promise. It should be enforced in the context of economic relations even if it would result in a deep change in the social and economic order.

Mill’s Liberal Socialist Perspective

The historian John Brebner wrote that “before the French Revolution of 1830 broke out, before he met or could be influenced by Mrs. Taylor [...], John Stuart Mill had become what might be called a liberal socialist” (1948: 67). However, Mill does not use this phrase to describe himself. Moreover, he did not defend a pure socialist doctrine, at least not in the sense given by Marx and Engels. Mill supported private property, especially because “private property, in every defence made of it, is supposed to mean the guarantee to individuals of the fruits of their own labour and abstinence” (CW II: 208). Social problems which can be attributed to

property do not rest on the principle itself, but on the way property may develop and on the consequences that may result in terms of inequalities of chances. If, Mill says, “the tendency of legislation had been to favour the diffusion, instead of the concentration of wealth – to encourage the subdivision of the large masses, instead of striving to keep them together; the principle of individual property would have been found to have no necessary connection with the physical and social evils which almost all Socialist writers assume to be inseparable from it” (CW II: 208). And he adds unambiguously that the system of private property should not only be maintained, but also developed and improved: “The political economist, for a considerable time to come, will be chiefly concerned with the conditions of existence and progress belonging to a society founded on private property and individual competition; and [...] the object to be principally aimed at, in the present stage of human improvement, is not the subversion of the system of individual property, but the improvement of it, and the full participation of every member of the community in its benefits” (CW II: 214). Mill is indeed a proponent of the free market and competition, although the “law of competition” (CW II: 216) should not become a type of regulation applicable to many domains of the social and even economic life.¹⁸

So, for what reasons has Mill been called a *liberal socialist*? These reasons can be found in his concern for the social reality of his time—esp. working conditions and inequalities (e.g. between labourers and a “non-labouring class,”¹⁹ between workers and employers)—but also in the interest he has shown for romanticism and utopian socialism.²⁰ His liberal socialist arguments constitute the “heterodox contributions” of his work to political economy²¹ and imbue the *Principles* with a special “tone” which, as Mill explains in his *Autobiography*, owes a lot to his wife Harriet: “This tone consisted chiefly in making the proper distinction between the laws of the Production of Wealth, which are real laws of nature, dependent on the properties of objects, and the modes of its Distribution, which, subject to certain conditions, depend on human will” (CW I: 255).

But one should not ask too much of political economy. Mill insists that it is not the aim of this branch of social philosophy to “treat of the whole of man’s nature as modified by the social state, nor of the whole conduct of man in society” (CW IV: 321). However, his *Principles*,

especially the chapter devoted to *the Probable Future of the Labouring Classes*, have implications which go far beyond the economic realm.

This is the case for education, an important issue in Mill's philosophy. Education is a recurring theme throughout the *Principles*, either as a general requirement or applied to specific classes of people, for example peasants. Wendy Donner stresses that, "in Mill's theory [...] a lot rests upon [...] educative and socialization procedures," because "people need a supportive social context to provide the circumstances in which human excellences develop" (2009: 92).

Education is narrowly connected with the issue of state intervention. Always in the *Principles*, Mill argues that the government should impose education for all children. It is not to say that a common education should be given (it would bear the risk of uniformity), but that it is an essential component of the function of the state: "Education is one of those things which it is admissible in principle that a government should provide for the people" (CW III: 948).

The function of the state is both a central element and a crucial test for Mill's idiosyncratic liberalism. According to H. J. McCloskey, Mill's view is "that the end of the state is to maximize the goods of true knowledge, rational belief, self-direction, self-perfection, moral character and responsibility, happiness and progress" (1950: 144). It is remarkable that Mill first warned against the risks, for the productivity of economy, resulting from an extended intervention of the state—"The only insecurity which is altogether paralysing to the active energies of producers, is that arising from the government, or from persons invested with its authority" (CW II: 113)—but he also proposes a different version as to the distribution of wealth which, in his view, could and should depend on state intervention: "Unlike the laws of Production, those of Distribution are partly of human institution: since the manner in which wealth is distributed in any given society, depends on the statutes or usages therein 'obtaining'" (CW II: 21). The emphasis on distribution was not so developed in Mill's predecessors in classical economy. Distribution of wealth does not obey the "physical laws," likely to be submitted to a scientific enquiry, which would regulate production. It is rather, Mill argues, "a matter of human institution solely" (CW II: 199). As Martha Nussbaum says about Mill's view, "government should not simply keep order; it should arrange for the

conditions of human equality to be met, something that, in Mill's own view, requires substantial redistribution [of wealth]" (2011: 14).

Of course, such a perspective may seem somewhat naive, particularly since, on the democratic scene, many conflicting interests have to be reconciled. Thus, part of the society (the wealthiest part, or those who think they deserve more due to their contributions to the social cooperation) could militate against a strong redistribution of wealth. This is why Richard Posner remarks that Mill "was probably mistaken in claiming that while government could do little to increase the aggregate wealth of society, it had a free hand in deciding upon the distribution of that wealth across the population" (1997: 348). In other words, the government's special consideration for the interests of the rich would de facto help to maintain a system of unequal distribution of wealth to the benefit of the wealthy.

Mill's emphasis on redistribution remains a significant aspect of his social liberalism. Another one is the importance he grants to the "stationary state" (CW III: 738). This state would be the ultimate social and economic situation resulting from the law of the falling rate of profit which was described, among others, by David Ricardo.²² This final stationary state would occur because capitalists, having no expectations of investment returns, would be discouraged to invest and, as a result, would lend their capital to workers. "As this change proceeded," Mill explains, "owners of capital would gradually find it to their advantage, instead of maintaining the struggle of the old system with workpeople of only the worst description, to lend their capital to the associations" (CW III: 793). The "associations" mentioned here refer to the cooperative system which would characterize the stationary state, the workers being then the owners of the means of production.

From a perspective of human progress, this final state has a moral and progressive dimension. It would be, as Michael Levy says, "the final state of the 'liberal ideal,'" a situation in which people "would be 'free' to develop their personalities in a greater variety of ways" (1981: 276–277).

To sum up, Mill supports free market, competition, and private property, but at the same time he calls unambiguously for a change in the economic order, for the sake of social justice and human development. His vision of the ideal social and economic order, illustrated by what he

calls the “stationary state,” expresses his conception of the full development of humanity.

Conclusion

A lot of Mill’s views in social philosophy could be invoked in contemporary debates. In fact, this is often the case, beyond the topical issues related to freedom of speech and expression. Some of the difficult issues raised by the function of the state, which are widely discussed nowadays, can be found in Mill’s political economy. Although the social, political and economic conditions of our time are far from the conditions which influenced his thought, many insights can be derived from the study of his arguments. This applies, in particular, to the relationships between utility, liberty and equality which have been discussed above. Their conflicts are inevitable, but through such conflicts they reveal an important democratic ideal, which is a hallmark of liberalism: the search for compromise through a democratic process of deliberation.

To conclude this chapter, two additional observations can be made. First, Mill argues that well-educated and well-trained persons should be at the head of the government, and that they should be assisted by specialists and bureaucrats. In short, the state should be ruled by an elite. But he immediately insists that “the electors are entitled to know how [the leaders] means to act; what opinions, on all things which concern his public duty, he intends should guide his conduct” (CW XIX: 510). Second, even if a liberal government could restrict civil liberties in the name of national security or intervene in the economy in order to protect the interests of society, the liberal spirit requires that its interventions be not authoritarian—that they imply, as Canto-Sperber says, “consensus through negotiations, compromises and transactions” (2006: 22). Such a requirement reflects Mill’s idea of liberalism.

Notes

1. Almost all the subsequent references to Mill's work will be taken from the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (CW). To indicate the source of the citations, we mention CW followed by the volume number.
2. 1848 is the year the first edition was published. There were seven editions of the *Principles*, the last one dating from 1873.
3. In this respect, he was influenced by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who advocated a religion of humanity in his *System of Positive Polity* (London, 1875–1877). Mill had a correspondence with Comte and discussed his work in *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (CW X, 1865).
4. Some authors consider that Mill was more radical than what is suggested by the common interpretation of his philosophy. For instance, Maurice Cowling contends that “Mill's liberalism was a dogmatic, religious one, not the soothing night-comforter for which it is sometimes mistaken. Mill's object was not to free men, but to convert them, and convert them to a peculiarly exclusive, peculiarly insinuating moral doctrine” (1963: il).
5. This formula is taken from what the French materialist philosopher Helvetius (1715–1771) wrote about the power of teaching in his posthumous book *De l'homme* (1773).
6. It is worth noting here that Mill stresses that “utility includes not solely the pursuit of happiness, but the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness” (CW X: 214). This assertion evokes the debate which occurred one century later about “negative utilitarianism,” exemplified by Karl Popper's formula: “Instead of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, one should more modestly demand the least amount of suffering for anybody” (1945: 241).
7. The economic man is not a psychological type of man, just a methodological artifact exhibiting “instrumental rationality and self-interest” (Anderson 2000: 172). Homo economicus is a “human being considered in regard to its economic aspect or capacity,” so this artifact should not be the object of moral judgments: “The actions of Homo economicus can no more be judged immoral than can a Stradivarius be blamed for making a bad tune” (Wilson and Dixon 2008: 243).
8. Inspired by Auguste Comte, Mill depicts three stages in the historical evolution of human societies, the last one being the stage of society, “a union

or aggregation of human beings for a common purpose or purposes” (IV: 320).

9. I refer especially to James Scanlan (1958).
10. “In governments, that is, in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will” (Montesquieu 1777: 196).
11. “If the opinion is wrong, [those who dissent from the opinion lose] the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth” (CW XVIII: 100).
12. Mill uses the first expression—“self-regarding conduct” (CW XVIII: 283), but not “other-regarding.”
13. Some authors consider that the harm principle is imprecise; for his part, Joel Feinberg argues that it should be complemented by a principle of offence, which states that “it is necessary to prevent hurt or offense (as opposed to injury or harm) to others” (1985: ix).
14. Mill insists on the fact that society may be as tyrannical as a government: “Protection [...] against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own” (CW XVIII: 220).
15. In *Liberty*, Mill discusses the issue of “strong impulses,” to which he gives the name of “energy” (CW XVIII: 263).
16. My translation.
17. Cranston remarks that “nearly all individuals were constantly pressured by neighbors, employers, husbands, and fathers, who were dominated in turn by taboos and conventions governing a host of matters – courtship, dress, recreation, use of the Sabbath, and much else” (1987: 86).
18. Mill states that the “spirit of competition” does not exercise an “unlimited sway” (CW II: 239). For instance, Mill warns that “so far as rents, profits, wages, prices, are determined by competition, laws may be assigned for them. Assume competition to be their exclusive regulator, and principles of broad generality and scientific precision may be laid down, according to which they will be regulated” (CW II: 239). He also explains how custom may alleviate the detrimental effects of competition: “Custom is the most powerful protector of the weak against the strong; their sole

- protector where there are no laws or government adequate to the purpose” (CW II: 240).
19. “The great social evil exists of a non-labouring class” (CW III: 758).
 20. Nicholas Capaldi includes in this category both the tenants of utopian systems (for example the adepts of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier) and those who strived to meet the social question without reconsidering the principles of the capitalist system (2012: 127).
 21. I borrow these words from Michael Montgomery (2012: 236), who proposes a critical summary of Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*.
 22. *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, ed. P. Sraffa, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2004. See Chapter 21.

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