“One very simple principle”

by Roger Kimball

The third in a series titled The betrayal of liberalism.

The most mischievous errors on record … [have been] half-truths taken as the whole.
—S. T. Coleridge, Literary Remains (1838)

From the winter of 1821, when I first read Bentham, … I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object.
—J. S. Mill, Autobiography (1873)

Complete moral tolerance is possible only when men have become completely indifferent to each other—that is to say, when society is at an end.
—J. F. Stephen, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (1873)

It is a melancholy truth that bad arguments often prevail over better ones, and that very bad arguments sometimes gain a virtual monopoly in the court of public sentiment. In extreme cases, a bad argument so mesmerizes the public that its status as an argument—as one, necessarily limited, point of view competing with others— tends to deliquesce. It takes on an aura of inevitability. It seems to present not so much a way of looking at the world as the world itself. When this happens, serious alternatives suffer the handicap of being regarded as mere “partisan” or political gestures, even as the partisan nature of the triumphant argument is increasingly lost to view. Dissent from this new orthodoxy then appears as dissent from the simple reality of the way things are: less a challenge than a perversion.
Liberalism, broadly defined, has long occupied this enviable position. It prescribes not only the terms of debate, but also the rhetorical atmosphere in which any debate must take place. Many of its central doctrines—above all, perhaps, its uncritical celebration of “innovation” in social, political, and moral matters—are taken-for-granted articles of belief. Do not be misled by any renewed attention that may from time to time be lavished on welfare reform, tax cuts, “family values,” law and order, civility, or military preparedness: these and other remedial initiatives identified as “conservative” today take place in a context saturated by liberal assumptions. For better or worse—no doubt for better and worse—we are all liberals now: by dint of contagion if not conviction. How could it be otherwise? As the English historian Maurice Cowling noted in his book Mill and Liberalism (1963; second edition, 1990), for many years now “to use liberal language has been taken to be intelligent: to reject it evidence of stupidity.” That conviction has long since been elevated into a fundamental donnée of intellectual life: an unspoken assumption that colors every aspect of political and moral deliberation.

No one was more important in bringing about this state of affairs than Cowling’s subject, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Mill would not have been surprised that to speak as he taught one to speak—to speak in Mill, as it were—was to be thought intelligent, while to speak otherwise was to be thought stupid. He believed it himself; and he did everything in his very considerable powers to encourage the belief in others. “The stupid party” was Mill’s own summary description of conservatives (this despite his admiration for Coleridge).

For anyone interested in understanding the nature of the modern liberal consensus, the extraordinary success of Mill’s rhetoric and the doctrines it advances afford a number of important lessons. It is an object lesson in the immense seductiveness inherent in a certain type of skeptical moralizing. Together with Rousseau, Mill supplied nearly all of the arguments and most of the emotional weather—the texture of sentiment—that have gone into defining the liberal vision of the world. His peculiar brand of utilitarianism—a cake of Benthamite hedonism glazed with Wordsworthian sentimentality—accounts for part of Mill’s appeal: it provides a perfect recipe for embellishing programmatic shallowness with a patina of spirituality and elevated “feeling.”

Another large part of Mill’s appeal rests on his “feminism.” I mean his conviction, put forward in The Subjection of Women (1869), that differences between the sexes were accidental and that, as Leslie Stephen put it, “women could be turned into men by trifling changes in the law.” Both are indispensable elements in the intoxicating potion that makes up Millian liberalism. (Mill’s “feminism,” by the way, got an additional boost from his long intimacy with Harriet Taylor—Mrs. John Taylor. He married her after her husband died and then, after her death, adulated her in embarrassingly extravagant terms; it is noteworthy that this “lofty minded” relationship was apparently never consummated.)

But the intellectual and affective keys to understanding the success of Mill’s doctrine are in On Liberty. This brief manifesto was published in 1859, coincidentally the same year as On the Origin of Species. Darwin’s book has been credited—and blamed—for all manner of moral and religious mischief. But in the long run On Liberty may have effected an even greater revolution. It profoundly changed the way we think, not about the world, exactly—Mill was not a scientist—but about what matters in the way we comport ourselves in the world.
Whatever else can be said about it, On Liberty is a masterpiece of liberal polemic. Its core ideas are as the air we breathe: unnoticed because ubiquitous. Mill’s arguments and pronouncements about man as a “progressive being,” the extent of individual autonomy, the limits of acceptable moral and legal censure, the importance of innovation and (perhaps his most famous phrase) “experiments in living,” and his corollary insistence on the poverty of custom, prejudice, and tradition: all are familiar to the point of invisibility. They are no longer objects of debate but of reverence, moral axioms that discussion is expected to presuppose, not challenge.

But the success of Mill’s teaching says nothing about the cogency of his arguments. In fact, Mill’s central arguments are open to—and have from the beginning been subjected to—serious challenge. Yet they have raged like wildfire through the Western world, consuming everything that stands in their path. Which means, among other things, that they exert an appeal quite distinct from any intellectual merit they may possess. (And which in turn suggests something about the potential liability of being thought intelligent—and vice versa.)

As for the nature of Mill’s arguments, consider, for example, his famous plea on behalf of moral, social, and intellectual “experiments.” Throughout history, Mill argues, the authors of such innovations have been objects of ridicule, persecution, and oppression; they have been ignored, silenced, exiled, imprisoned, even killed. But (Mill continues) we owe every step of progress, intellectual as well as moral, to the daring of innovators. “Without them,” he writes, “human life would become a stagnant pool. Not only is it they who introduce good things which did not before exist; it is they who keep the life in those which already exist.” Ergo, innovators—“developed human beings” is one phrase Mill uses for them—should not merely be tolerated but positively be encouraged as beacons of future improvement.

The philosopher David Stove calls this the “They All Laughed At Christopher Columbus” argument. In a brief, penetrating essay in Cricket Versus Republicanism (1995), Stove notes that “the Columbus argument” (as he calls it for short)

has swept the world. With every day that has passed since Mill published it, it has been more influential than it was the day before. In the intellectual and moral dissolution of the West in the twentieth century, every step has depended on conservatives being disarmed, at some critical point, by the Columbus argument; by revolutionaries claiming that any resistance made to them is only another instance of that undeserved hostility which beneficial innovators have so regularly met with in the past.

The weakness of the Columbus argument, Stove observes, is glaring. Granted that every change for the better has depended on someone embarking on a new departure; but so, too, has every change for the worse. And surely there have been at least as many proposed innovations which “were or would have been for the worse as ones which were or would have been for the better.” Which means that we have at least as much reason to discourage innovators as to encourage them, especially when their innovations bear on things as immensely complex as the organization of society.

The triumph of Millian liberalism shows that such objections have fallen on deaf ears. But why? Why have “innovation,” “originality,” etc., become magic charms that neutralize criticism before it even gets started when so much that is produced in the name of innovation is obviously a change for the worse? An inventory of the fearsome social innovations made in this century alone should have made every thinking person wary of unchaperoned innovation. One reason that innovation has survived with its reputation intact, Stove notes, is that Mill and his
heirs have been careful to supply a “one-sided diet of examples.” It is a technique as simple as it is effective:

Mention no past innovators except those who were innovators-for-the-better. Harp away endlessly on the examples of Columbus and Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno, Socrates and (if you think the traffic will bear it) Jesus. Conceal the fact that there must have been at least one innovator-for-the-worse for every one of these (very overworked) good guys. Never mention Lenin or Pol Pot, Marx or Hegel, Robespierre or the Marquis de Sade, or those forgotten innovators of genius to whom humanity has been indebted for any of the countless insane theories which have ever acquired a following in astronomy, geology, or biology.

Mill never missed an opportunity to expatiate on the value of “originality,” “eccentricity,” and the like. (“The amount of eccentricity in a society,” he wrote, “has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage it contained.”) But you never caught Mill dilating on the “improvement on established practice” inaugurated by Robespierre and St. Just, or the “experiments in living” conducted by the Marquis de Sade. (It is hardly surprising that, today, the phrase “experiments in living” is redolent of the fatuous “experiments” of the 1960s; whatever else can be said about the phrase, Stove is surely right that it represents “a sickeningly dishonest attempt to capture some of the deserved prestige of science for things that had not the remotest connection with science”—principally “certain sexual and domestic arrangements of a then-novel kind.”)

David Stove offers some telling insights into the weaknesses of Mill’s liberalism. But in order to understand its world-conquering success, one has to go beyond simple credulity and an abundance of one-sided examples. Flattery comes into it. Mill was exceptionally adroit at appealing to his readers’ vanity. When he spoke (as he was always speaking) of “persons of decided mental superiority” he made it seem as though he might actually be speaking to them. Mill said that there was “no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns.” Quite right! Even if persons of genius are always likely to be “a small minority,” still we must “preserve the soil in which they grow.” Consequently, people have a duty to shun custom and nurture their individual “self-development” if they are not to jeopardize “their fair share of happiness” and the “mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable.”

But Mill’s blandishments went even deeper. In On Liberty, Mill presented himself as a prophet of individual liberty. He has often been regarded as such, especially by academics, who of course have been instrumental in propagating the gospel according to Mill. And “gospel” is the mot juste. Like many radical reformers, Mill promised almost boundless freedom but arrived bearing an exacting new system of belief. In this sense, as Maurice Cowling argues, On Liberty has been “one of the most influential of modern political tracts,” chiefly because “its purpose has been misunderstood.” Contrary to common opinion, Cowling wrote, Mill’s book was not so much a plea for individual freedom, as a means of ensuring that Christianity would be superseded by that form of liberal, rationalising utilitarianism which went by the name of the Religion of Humanity. 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. Mill wished to moralize all social activity…. Mill, no less than Marx, Nietzsche, or Comte, claimed to replace Christianity by “something better.” Atheists and agnostics, humanists and free-thinkers may properly give thanks to Mill.
This tension in Mill’s work—between Mill the libertarian and Mill the moralistic utilitarian—helps to account for the vertiginous quality that suffuses the liberalism for which *On Liberty* was a kind of founding scripture. Mill’s announced enemy can be summed up in words like “custom,” “prejudice,” “established morality.” All his work goes to undermine these qualities, not because they are necessarily in error but because they have not been subjected to the acid-test of his version of the utilitarian calculus (what Mill is more likely to refer to as “rational self-conscious scrutiny”). An earlier tradition celebrated custom precisely because it had prevailed and given good service through the vicissitudes of time and change; its longevity was a token of its worthiness. It was in this sense, for example, that Edmund Burke extolled prejudice, writing that “prejudice renders a man’s virtue his habit… . Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.”

Mill overturned this traditional view. Indeed, he was instrumental in getting the public to associate “prejudice” indelibly with “bigotry.” For Mill, established morality is suspect because it is established. In this sense, his liberalism is essentially corrosive of existing societal arrangements, institutions, and morality. In this sense, his philosophy is a kind of inversion of Alexander Pope’s optimism: “Whatever is, is suspect” might be Mill’s motto. He constantly castigates the “magical influence of custom” (“magical” being a negative epithet for Mill), the “despotism of custom [that] is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement,” the “tyranny of opinion” that makes it so difficult for “the progressive principle” to flourish, and so on. According to Mill, the “greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history because the sway of custom has been complete.”

Such passages reveal the core of moral arrogance in Mill’s liberalism. They suggest to what extent he remained—despite the various criticisms he made—a faithful heir of Bentham’s utilitarianism: and not just the Bentham who propounded the principle of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number,” but also the Bentham who applauded the proceedings of the Star Chamber, advocated the imprisonment of beggars, defended torture, and devised the “Panopticon”—a machine, he said, for “grinding rogues honest”—to keep miscreants under constant surveillance.[1] Liberty was always on Mill’s lips; a new orthodoxy was ever in his heart. There is an important sense in which the libertarian streak in *On Liberty* is little more than a prophylactic against the coerciveness that its assumption of virtuous rationality presupposes.

Such “paradoxes” (to put it politely) show themselves whenever the constructive part of Mill’s doctrine is glimpsed through his cheerleading for freedom and eccentricity. Mill’s doctrine of liberty begins with a promise of emancipation: the individual, in order to construct a “life plan” worthy of his nature, must shed the carapace of inherited opinion. He must learn to subject all his former beliefs to rational scrutiny. He must dare to be “eccentric,” “novel,” “original.” At the same time, Mill notes, not without misgiving, that

As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase; the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested. The cessation, on one question after another, of serious controversy is one of the necessary incidents of the consolidation of opinion—a consolidation as salutary in the case of true opinions as it is dangerous and noxious when the opinions are erroneous.

In other words, the partisan of Millian liberalism undertakes the destruction of inherited custom and belief in order to construct a bulwark of custom and belief that can be inherited. As he put it in his *Autobiography* (posthumously published in 1873),
I looked forward, through the present age of loud disputes but generally weak convictions, to a future ... [in which] convictions as to what is right and wrong, useful and pernicious, [will be] deeply engraven on the feelings by early education and general unanimity of sentiment, and so firmly grounded in reason and in the true exigencies of life, that they shall not, like all former and present creeds, religious, ethical, and political, require to be periodically thrown off and replaced by others.

So: a “unanimity of sentiment” (a.k.a. custom) is all well and good as long as it is grounded in the “true exigencies of life”—as defined, of course, by J. S. Mill.

One measure of Mill’s triumph is that the “unanimity” of sentiment that he looked forward to has long since been all but achieved. Not that Mill has lacked critics. On the contrary, from the very beginning both his utilitarianism and his doctrine of liberty have been subjected to searching, indeed devastating, criticism. That they not only survived but also thrived is a testament to—among other things—the beguiling power of Mill’s rhetoric and the seductive spell of his core doctrines. On the principle that sooner or later reality must vanquish illusion, however, it is worth revisiting certain criticisms of Mill’s liberalism. Repetition of an old truth may eventually dislodge even stubborn new falsehoods.

By far the most concentrated and damaging single attack on Mill’s liberalism is Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, first published serially in the Pall Mall Gazette in 1872–1873, and then in book form in March 1873 in the last year of Mill’s life. It was written by the lawyer, judge, and journalist Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (1829–1894): Leslie Stephen’s older brother and hence—such is the irony of history—Virginia Woolf’s uncle. Mill himself never responded to Stephen’s book beyond observing, as Leslie Stephen reports in his excellent biography of his brother, that he thought the book “more likely to repel than attract.” But several of Mill’s disciples responded—the most famous of whom was the liberal politician and journalist John Morley (1838–1923). Stephen brought out a second edition of his book the following year, 1874, in which he reproduces and replies to many criticisms raised by Morley and others. Stephen described Liberty, Equality, Fraternity as “mainly controversial and negative.” Pugnacious and devastating would be equally appropriate adjectives. As one commentator put it, Stephen made “mincemeat” of Mill. And when it appeared, the book sparked a lively controversy, rousing, as Leslie Stephen noted, “the anger of some, the sympathy of others, and the admiration of all who liked to see hard hitting on any side of a great question.” And yet for nearly one hundred years Liberty, Equality, Fraternity disappeared almost without a trace. After 1874, it was not republished until Cambridge University Press brought out a new edition in 1967.

Writing in the introduction to the Chicago edition of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Richard Posner described the book as “a magnificent period piece: as vivid and revealing a document of British imperialism in its heyday as John Buchan’s novel Prester John and Kipling’s verse would be a generation later.” He was right. Written directly after Stephen completed a stint as Chief Justice of Calcutta, the book is full of the justified confidence of flourishing empire. Stephen saw the great good that the English had brought to India—in health and education, in maintaining civic order, in putting down barbaric customs like suttee; he recognized clearly that following Mill’s liberal principles would make carrying out that civilizing mandate difficult if not impossible; and he decided forthrightly that the fault lay with Mill’s liberalism, not with civilization.
It is a mistake, however, to regard Liberty, Equality, Fraternity merely as a “period piece.” As Judge Posner acknowledges, it is also “an audacious and radical challenge to classical liberalism.” The challenge is all the more audacious because it emerged from ground very close to Mill. Stephen was himself a Liberal (though one of conservative temperament) and a utilitarian of decidedly undoctrinaire persuasion. He comments at one point that “Bentham’s whole conception of happiness as something which could, as it were, be served out in rations, is open to great objection.” Stephen was too moral to be a strict utilitarian, too pragmatic to abandon that philosophy altogether. Leslie Stephen described him as “at once a Puritan and a Utilitarian,” which seems about right. Stephen was also an ardent admirer of many aspects of Mill’s philosophy; early on in Liberty, Equality, Fraternity he called Mill “a great man to whom I am in every way indebted.” He had even reviewed On Liberty warmly in the Saturday Review when it first appeared. But in time he came to regard Mill’s doctrine of liberty—and the apotheosis of an abstract equality and fraternity that flows from it—as an unmitigated disaster. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity explains why.

Judge Posner describes as “naughty” Stephen’s decision to adopt the revolutionary motto “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” as the title of a book about Millian liberalism. But that is perhaps because his sympathies on many issues are closer to Mill’s than to Stephen’s. In fact, the title is perfect. As Stephen explains in his opening pages, the book is an effort to examine “the doctrines which are rather hinted at than expressed by the phrase ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.’” Although that phrase had its origin in the French Revolution, it nonetheless had come to express “the creed of a religion,” one “less definite than most forms of Christianity, but not on that account the less powerful.” On the contrary, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” epitomized “one of the most penetrating influences of the day,” namely the “Religion of Humanity”—the secular, socialistic alternative to Christianity put forward in different ways by thinkers like Auguste Comte, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. “It is one of the commonest beliefs of the day,” Stephen wrote, “that the human race collectively has before it splendid destinies of various kinds, and that the road to them is to be found in the removal of all restraints on human conduct, in the recognition of a substantial equality between all human creatures, and in fraternity in general.” Taking On Liberty, The Subjection of Women, and Utilitarianism (1863) as his primary texts, Stephen shows in tonic detail why these beliefs are mistaken and, if put into practice, are bound to result in moral chaos and widespread personal unhappiness.

Among other things, the phrase “liberty, equality, fraternity” suggests the immense rhetorical advantage that liberalism begins with. One can hardly criticize the slogan without arousing the suspicion that one must be a partisan of oppression, servitude, and dissension. “Liberty,” Stephen notes, “is a eulogistic word.” Therein lies its magic. Substitute a neutral synonym—“permission,” for example, or “leave” (as in “I give you leave to go”)—and the spell is broken: the troops will not rally. It is the same with equality and fraternity. The eulogistic aspect of liberalism means that its critics are practically required to begin with an apology. So it is hardly surprising that Stephen notes at the beginning of his book that he is “not the advocate of Slavery, Caste, and Hatred” and that there is a sense in which he, too, can endorse the phrase “liberty, equality, fraternity.”
The problem is that Mill and other advocates of the Religion of Humanity have exaggerated the advantages and minimized the disadvantages that these qualities involve. For one thing, Stephen points out, they are far too abstract to form the basis of anything like a religion. They are also inherently disestablishing with regard to existing social arrangements; that indeed is one reason they exert so great an appeal for the radical sensibility. Take Mill’s doctrine of liberty, which boils down to the exhortation: Let every one please himself in any way he likes so long as he does not hurt his neighbor. According to Mill, any moral system that aimed at more—to benefit the moral character of society at large or the individuals in it—would be wrong in principle. But this, Stephen notes, would “condemn every existing system of morals.”

Strenuously preach and rigorously practise the doctrine that our neighbor’s private character is nothing to us, and the number of unfavorable judgments formed, and therefore the number of inconveniences inflicted by them can be reduced as much as we please, and the province of liberty can be enlarged in corresponding ratio. Does any reasonable man wish for this? Could anyone desire gross licentiousness, monstrous extravagance, ridiculous vanity, or the like, to be unnoticed, or, being known, to inflict no inconveniences which can possibly be avoided?

As Stephen dryly observes, pace Mill, “the custom of looking upon certain courses of conduct with aversion is the essence of morality.”

The great pragmatic lesson to be drawn from Liberty, Equality, Fraternity concerns the relation between freedom and power. “Power,” Stephen insists, “precedes liberty” — that is, “liberty, from the very nature of things, is dependent upon power; and ... it is only under the protection of a powerful, well-organized, and intelligent government that any liberty can exist at all.” It is for this reason that it makes no sense to ask whether liberty tout court is a good thing. The question whether liberty is a good or bad thing, Stephen writes, “is as irrational as the question whether fire is a good or bad thing. It is both good and bad according to time, place, and circumstance.” Mill’s failure to recognize these truths endows his doctrine of liberty with extraordinary malleability. It also infuses it with an air of unreality whenever it approaches the problem of freedom in everyday life. It is axiomatic with Mill that “society has no business as society to decide anything to be wrong which concerns only the individual.” It follows, Mill writes, that “fornication, for example, must be tolerated and so must gambling.” But should a person be free to be a pimp? Or to keep a gambling house? Mill thinks these are exceptionally difficult questions:

Although the public, or the State are not warranted in authoritatively deciding, for purposes of repression or punishment, that such or such conduct affecting only the interests of the individual is good or bad, they are fully justified in assuming, if they regard it as bad, that its being so or not is at least a disputable question: That, this being supposed, they cannot be acting wrongly in endeavoring to exclude the influence of solicitations which are not disinterested, of instigators who cannot possibly be impartial—who have a direct personal interest on one side, and that the side which the State believes to be wrong, and who confessedly promote it for personal objects only.

To which Stephen replies: “There is a kind of ingenuity which carries its own refutation on its face. How can the State or the public be competent to determine any question whatever if it is not competent to decide that gross vice is a bad thing? I do not,” Stephen continues,
think the State ought to stand bandying compliments with pimps. “Without offence to your better judgment, dear sir, and without presuming to set up my opinion against yours, I beg to observe that I am entitled for certain purposes to treat the question whether your views of life are right as one which admits of two opinions. I am far from expressing absolute condemnation of an experiment in living from which I dissent, … but still I am compelled to observe that you are not altogether unbiased by personal considerations…” My feeling is that if society gets its grip on the collar of such a fellow it should say to him, “You dirty rascal, it may be a question whether you should be suffered to remain in your native filth untouched, or whether my opinion about you should be printed by the lash on your bare back. That question will be determined without the smallest reference to your wishes or feelings; but as to the nature of my opinion about you, there can be no question at all.”

The contrast of tone between Mill and Stephen could not be more graphic. And here we approach a subject that has become almost undiscussable. As Stephen noted in his letters, there was a peculiar “want of virility” about Mill. In part it was a matter of abstractedness: Mill seemed to him “comparable to a superlatively crammed senior wrangler, whose body has been stunted by his brains.” He was “too much a calculating machine and too little of a human being.” But besides abstractedness, there was also an element of what Leslie Stephen called “feminine tenderness” about Mill: his character, his prose, his doctrines. It is not, I think, coincidental that one senses something similar in Rousseau: a smothering fussiness, grown rancorous and paranoid in Rousseau’s case, merely querulous and impertinent in Mill’s. The “feminization of society” we occasionally read about is in this sense a coefficient of the triumph of liberalism. Its distrust of masculine directness is the other side of its inveterate impulse to moralize all social activity.

This stereoscopic quality in Mill’s doctrine of liberty shows itself in other ways as well. One moment it seems to license unrestrained liberty; the next moment, it seems to sanction the most sweeping coercion. When Stephen says that “the great defect” of Mill’s doctrine of liberty is that it implies “too favorable an estimate of human nature,” we know exactly what he means. Mill writes as if people, finally awakened to their rational interests, would put aside all petty concerns and devote themselves to “lofty minded” relationships and the happiness of mankind in general. “He appears to believe,” Stephen writes with barely concealed incredulity, “that if men are all freed from restraints and put, as far as possible, on an equal footing, they will naturally treat each other as brothers, and work together harmoniously for their common good.” At the same time, Mill’s estimation of actually existing men and women is very unfavorable. “Ninety-nine in a hundred”, he tells us, act in ignorance of their real motives. He is always going on about “wretched social arrangements,” the bad state of society, and the general pettiness of his contemporaries. In this respect, too, he resembles Rousseau, who late in life confessed that “I think I know man, but as for men, I know them not.”

In fact, when it comes to his view of mankind, Mill vacillates between the two caricatures: a pretty one and a repulsive one (actually, they are both pretty repulsive, though in different ways). The friction between the two produces an illusion of benevolence; that illusion is at the heart of liberalism’s appeal. Yet what Mill describes is an ideal that, in proportion as it is realized, tends to grow into its opposite. In Utilitarianism, Mill writes that “as between his own happiness and that of others, justice requires [everyone] to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.” Stephen comments: “If this be so, I can only say that nearly the whole of nearly every human creature is one continued course of injustice, for nearly everyone passes his life in providing the means of happiness for himself and those who are closely connected with him, leaving others all but entirely out of account.” And this, Stephen argues, is as it should be, not merely for prudential but for moral reasons:
The man who works from himself outwards, whose conduct is governed by ordinary motives, and who acts with a view to his own advantage and the advantage of those who are connected with himself in definite, assignable ways, produces in the ordinary course of things much more happiness to others … than a moral Don Quixote who is always liable to sacrifice himself and his neighbors. On the other hand, a man who has a disinterested love of the human race—that is to say, who has got a fixed idea about some way of providing for the management of the concerns of mankind—is an unaccountable person … who is capable of making his love for men in general the ground of all sorts of violence against men in particular.

“The real truth,” Stephen concludes, “is that the human race is so big, so various, so little known, that no one can really love it.”

Mill’s refusal to recognize this is a standing invitation to irony. His attitude reminds one of W. H. Auden’s version of the social worker’s ethic: “We’re all on earth to help others. What on earth the others are here for, we don’t know.” Truth in advertising should have required On Liberty to begin with the words, “Once upon a time….” Although written by a learned man and talented philosopher, there is a sense in which it really belongs more to the genre of fantasy than moral philosophy. It says a number of emollient things about human capabilities, but outlines a moral-political system more or less guaranteed to stymie those capabilities.

Consider Mill’s paeans to the value of eccentricity, diversity, and originality as solvents of “the tyranny of opinion.” Doubtless he is sincere in his eulogies. But the growth of equalizing liberty as he envisions it would tend to homogenize society and hence to reduce genuine originality and individuality. Mill’s philosophy declares originality desirable even as it works to make it impossible. In a memorable analogy, Stephen says that Mill’s notion of liberty as a politically “progressive” imperative in combination with his demand for originality is “like plucking a bird’s feathers in order to put it on a level with beasts, and then telling it to fly.” Furthermore, by confounding, as Stephen puts it, the proposition that “variety is good with the proposition that goodness is various,” Mill’s teaching tends to encourage a shallow worship of mere variety, diversity for its own sake with no regard for the nature and quality of expressions of diversity. This is obviously a lesson we still have not learned. Notwithstanding the slogans of our cultural commissars, “diversity” itself is neither good nor bad. Signs announcing a “commitment to diversity” that one sees at college campuses and businesses across the country are so nauseating precisely because they are little more than badges announcing their own virtue. The odor of political correctness emanating from them is the odor of unearned self-satisfaction.

In On Liberty, Mill says that “exceptional individuals … should be encouraged in acting differently from the mass” in order that they might “point the way” for the rest of us. But Stephen is right that “if this advice were followed, we should have as many little oddities in manner and behaviour as we have people who wish to pass for men of genius. Eccentricity is far more often a mark of weakness than a mark of strength. Weakness wishes, as a rule, to attract attention by trifling distinctions, strength wishes to avoid it. Originality consists in thinking for yourself, not in thinking differently from other people.” It is part of Mill’s polemical purpose to claim that society hitherto had persecuted eccentricity out of fear and small-mindedness. But again Stephen is surely right that “it would be hard to show that the great reformers of the world have been persecuted for ‘eccentricity.’ They were persecuted because their doctrines were disliked, rightly or wrongly as the case may be. The difference between Mr. Mill’s views and mine is that he instinctively assumes that whatever is is wrong. I say, try each case on its merits.”
Stephen’s recourse to the particular—he would have cited his allegiance to utilitarian principles of expediency—infuses his discussion of the relation between liberty and power with robust commonsense. It also sets it sharply at odds with Mill’s treatment of those issues. In one of the most famous passages in On Liberty, Mill outlines what he thinks are the limits of acceptable interference in an individual’s “liberty of action.”

The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle, as 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. That principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. 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. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.

Mill goes on to add various qualifications. He notes, for example, that this license applies only to “human beings in the maturity of their faculties,” not to “children or young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood.” He further notes, in a passage that has caused great hand-wringing among his disciples, that “despotism is a legitimate form of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.” But—and here is the nub of his argument restated—“as soon as mankind have attained the capacity of being guided to their own improvement by conviction or persuasion (a period long since reached in all nations with whom we need here concern ourselves), compulsion is no longer admissible as a means to their own good, and is justifiable only for the security of others.”

Mill’s description of his “one very simple principle” shows the extent to which his liberalism rests, as the philosopher Roger Scruton put it in The Meaning of Conservatism (second edition, 1984), on a “generalization of the first-person point of view.” His elevation of the “I” is also a movement of abstraction. One of the first things one notices about Mill’s “individuals” is how little air there is around them. They exist as flat, abstract cut-outs. Arguing for the relativity of moral values, Mill notes that “the same causes which make [someone] a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking.” But this is to take an entirely disembodied view of the relevant “causes.” Part of what makes (or once made) someone a churchgoer in London is living in London; that is not an “accidental” datum that can be subtracted without cost from an individual’s identity. Our culture and history are essential ingredients: remove them and you remove the individual. Individuality is not fungible.

Mill’s assumptions about the nature of individuality stand at the heart of his liberalism. In the first place, it is by no means clear that we have knowledge (in Stephen’s paraphrase) of any “very simple principles as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control.” Mill’s bland language conceals an extraordinary, and unjustified, presumption. In the second place, Stephen notes, Mill’s famous distinction between “self-regarding” and “other-regarding” acts is “radically vicious. It assumes that some acts regard the agent only, and that some regard other people. In fact, by far the most important part of our conduct regards both ourselves and others.”
As Stephen observes, “men are so closely connected together that it is quite impossible to say how far the influence of acts apparently of the most personal character may extend.” The splendid isolation that Mill’s imperative requires is a chimera. For it is a matter of fact that “every human creature is deeply interested not only in the conduct, but in the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of millions of persons who stand in no other assignable relation to him than that of being his fellow-creatures.” By broadly excluding the sanctions not only of “legal penalties” but also of “the moral coercion of public opinion,” Mill renders his notion of liberty fantastic. Some of Mill’s qualifications would seem to concede something to common sense; but they do so at the cost of turning his “one very simple principle” into an utter commonplace. “Either,” Stephen observes, Mill means that “superior wisdom is not in every case a reason why one man should control another—which is a mere commonplace—or else [he] means that in all the countries which we are accustomed to call civilised the mass of adults are so well acquainted with their own interests and so much disposed to pursue them that no compulsion or restraint” is ever justified, which is incredible. It is precisely this oscillation between the commonplace and the fantastic that has made Mill’s liberalism such a durable commodity. Its radical promise is hedged by common sense qualifications that can be wheeled out when objections are raised and then promptly retired when the work of remaking society is meant to proceed.

Stephen is quick to admit that “if Mr. Mill had limited himself to the proposition that in our own time and country it is highly important that the great questions of morals and theology should be discussed openly and with complete freedom from all legal restraints, I should agree with him.” He agrees, too, that “neither legislation nor public opinion ought to be meddlesome,” and that “those who have due regard to the incurable weaknesses of human nature will be very careful how they inflict penalties upon mere vice, or even upon those who make a trade of promoting it, unless special circumstances call for their infliction.” But he goes on to note that it is “one thing … to tolerate vice so long as it is inoffensive, and quite another to give it a legal right not only to exist, but to assert itself in the face of the world as an ‘experiment in living’ as good as another, and entitled to the same protection from the law.”

Mill’s “one very simple principle” depends on a variety of assumptions about human nature and the way moral life ought to be conducted. Above all, it depends on a notably anemic view of moral life: one in which the sociocultural fabric that gives body to freedom is redefined as the enemy of freedom and the actual process of moral choice is turned into a process of frigid ratiocination. Mill’s view of liberty is at once far too simplistic and far too rigorous. It is simplistic in its demonization of the customary and conventional; it is overly rigorous in its demand that moral choices be arrived at through “the collision of adverse opinions”: “on no other terms,” Mill says, “can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right.” To deny this—to think that sanctions, even the sanctions of negative public opinion, ought to be otherwise enjoined—“is to assume our own infallibility.”

Against this, Stephen points out that “the incalculable majority of mankind form their opinions” not by a process of ratiocination but out of a network of transmitted custom, prejudice, and conventional practice. “Doctrines come home to most people in general, not if and in so far as they are free to discuss all their applications, but if and in so far as they happen to interest them and appear to illustrate and interpret their own experience.” Furthermore, on the issue of infallibility, Stephen points out that there are innumerable propositions about which we have rational assurance, even though we do not claim infallibility. “There are plenty of reasons for not forbidding people to deny the existence of London Bridge and the river Thames, but the fear that the proof of those propositions would be weakened or that the person making the law would claim infallibility is not among the number.”
Mill hoped that his regime of liberty would replace the reign of prejudice with the reign of reason. In fact, it has had the effect of camouflaging prejudices with the rhetoric of reason. And the effort to unseat customary practice and belief has had the effect not, as Mill predicted, of encouraging a drift toward unanimity but of increasing chaos. This is not surprising: as Stephen noted, “the notorious result of unlimited freedom of thought and discussion is to produce general scepticism on many subjects in the vast majority of minds.” But such are the paradoxes generated by Mill’s liberalism.

Today, we are living with the institutionalization of those paradoxes—above all, perhaps, the paradox that in aiming to achieve a society that is maximally tolerant we at the same time give (in David Stove’s words) “maximum scope to the activities of those who have set themselves to achieve the maximally-intolerant society.” More importantly, we also paralyze our powers of resistance. That paralysis is the secret poison at the heart of Mill’s liberalism. Stephen noted that Mill’s “very simple principle” that coercive public opinion ought to be exercised only for self-protective purposes was “a paradox so startling that it is almost impossible to argue against.” He was right. As Maurice Cowling observed, “to argue with Mill, in Mill’s terms, is to concede defeat. Rational does not have to mean conclusions reached by critical self-examination. Prejudice may reasonably be used to mean commitments about which argument has been declined, but to decline argument is not in itself irrational. Bigotry and prejudice are not necessarily the best descriptions of opinions which Comtean determinism has stigmatized as historically outdated.”

Mill claimed a monopoly on the word “rational.” So long as that monopoly remains unchallenged our paralysis will be complete. The antidote to the moral helplessness that Mill’s liberalism generates is not to be found by digging deeper in the trench of liberal rationalization. On the contrary, it begins with the forthright recognition that no “one very simple principle” can relieve us of the duties we owe to the inhabited world that we, for this brief while, share with many others.

Notes
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