



Mill and the Subjection of Women

Author(s): Julia Annas

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Mill and the Subjection of Women

JULIA ANNAS

When Mill's *The Subjection of Women* was published in 1869 it was ahead of its time in boldly championing feminism.¹ It failed to inaugurate a respectable intellectual debate. Feminist writers have tended to refer to it with respect but without any serious attempt to come to grips with Mill's actual arguments. Kate Millet's chapter in *Sexual Politics* is the only sustained discussion of Mill in the feminist literature that I am aware of, but it is not from a philosophical viewpoint, and deals with Mill only in the service of an extended comparison with Ruskin. Philosophical books on Mill give the essay short measure. Alan Ryan in *J. S. Mill* heads one chapter 'Liberty and *The Subjection of Women*', but the former work gets twenty-six pages and the latter only four. Ryan says that 'it is almost entirely concerned with the legal disabilities of women in Victorian England'. H. J. McCloskey, in *John Stuart Mill: A Critical Study*, gives the essay one and a half pages, commenting that it reads 'like a series of truisms' and seems so unimportant today because equality of the sexes has been achieved!

It is, however, simply false to say that Mill's essay is mostly concerned with legal technicalities which have since been changed, and so of no great interest today. *The Subjection of Women* is concerned with women's legal disabilities only in so far as they reflect profound social and economic inequalities between the sexes. While today there are few ways in which women are under legal disabilities compared with men (though it would be a mistake to think there are none) women are still subject to economic and social discrimination in a variety of ways, and it is extraordinary to think that Mill's essay no longer contains anything interesting or controversial just because there have been a few changes in the law. To take only one example: today a battered wife is no longer under legal compulsion to return to her husband, as she was in Mill's day, but until very recently the pressure for her to do so was overwhelming; the informal ways in which society enforces conformity to the institution of the family have never been stronger. Although we are more receptive to the ideal, we are nowhere near achieving in practice the kind of equality between the sexes that Mill looks forward to. It will be a good day when *The Subjection of Women* is outdated, but it is not yet.

¹ It became at once unpopular and neglected; it was the only book of Mill's ever to lose his publisher money (A. Ryan, *J. S. Mill*, p. 125). In 1867, when he was an MP, Mill tried to amend the Reform Bill in such a way as to secure the franchise for women, but only 73 MPs voted with him.

Ryan has another objection: 'Mill's coolness towards sexual issues makes *The Subjection of Women* an awkward work to place in twentieth-century arguments about sexual equality'. It is true that Mill's actual references to sex are all very Victorian in the worst sense, but it does not follow that this undermines his argument, unless it can be shown that his main contentions are based on his false view of women's sexuality. Since Mill does not put forward purported facts about female sexuality as the main support for any of his conclusions, argument is needed, which Ryan does not provide, to show that what Mill says about women should be revised substantially in the light of our greatly altered beliefs about women's sexuality. Mill has often been dismissed on the ground that, being pre-Freudian, he failed to understand the basic importance of sex in determining personality.² However, Mill's non-Freudian approach may nowadays be thought a positive advantage, given the extremely contentious character of Freud's views on women and the history of dispute in the psychoanalytic movement on this topic.

The predominant view seems to be that *The Subjection of Women* is obviously right but of little importance. I believe, on the contrary, that it is of great importance, but, far from being obviously truistic, contains very deep confusions; this paper is an attempt to disentangle some of them. I should say at the outset, however, that the reason why I think this is worthwhile is that Mill's confusions are not shallow ones; they come rather from a desire to have things too many ways at once, to do justice to all the complexities of a topic which even now is far from being adequately clarified. If this were not so, it would indeed be perverse to search for faults in what Millett justly calls his 'splendidly controlled humanist outrage'.

I shall begin by distinguishing two ways in which one might protest at existing sexual inequalities.

1. *The reformist approach.* One can claim that it is unfair for women to be excluded from opportunities that are open to men, because women are in fact capable of doing what men do, and do in fact resent being excluded. This is a straightforwardly factual claim; the available openings are not in fact commensurate with women's desires and needs, and what is therefore required is reform of the existing social system. The most obvious justification for this is utilitarian: if desires are no longer frustrated, this will lead to greater happiness for women, and if unused abilities are put to work, everyone will benefit; in both cases the benefits are such as to be so regarded already by both men and women. This argument is quite compatible with there being many important empirically established differences of nature

² Freud translated Mill's essay, and discussed his dislike of it in the famous letter to his fiancée in which he says, 'If . . . I imagined my gentle sweet girl as a competitor it would only end by my telling her . . . that I am fond of her and that I implore her to withdraw from the struggle into the calm uncompetitive activity of my home'.

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between the sexes; all that it excludes is that these differences should justify inferior opportunities for women in the respects in which their contribution can be recognized.

2. *The radical approach.* One can also claim that the subjection of women is unfair, but not from observation of actual frustrated desires and unfulfilled capacities. Rather it may be admitted, and even stressed, that most women lack ambition and serious concentration, but argued that this very fact shows that their natural impulses have been suppressed by a system that brings them up to think submissiveness and dependence virtues, and that what is required is that they (and men) be liberated from this system. This is not a straightforwardly factual claim, for the appeal is to women's nature, but this nature is not something that can be ascertained from women's present behaviour and achievements. This approach is not exactly *a priori*, for it may well appeal to known facts about human nature; but these will be extremely general and theory-laden, as opposed to the sort of facts that can be read off from people's observed behaviour. The radical approach will have little use for reform of the existing system; to a radical, this would be merely futile, enabling a few women to get ahead by adopting male values, but doing nothing for the mass of women whose natures have been systematically thwarted. What is required is a radical change in the whole framework of society's attitudes to the relations between the sexes; and the justification of this radical change will be one of justice and of women's rights, not a utilitarian one. As I am using 'utilitarian' in this connection, a utilitarian justification is one that appeals to the satisfaction of desires that people actually have, not those they would have in some ideal condition.³ Changes that merely produce the maximum satisfaction of desires in the system as it is will be rejected by the radical, because integral to the system are the institutions and attitudes that according to the radical systematically deform women's natures. In contrast to the reformist, the radical does seem committed to holding that there are no large and interesting differences of nature between men and women, none, at any rate, that could justify any institutionalization of sexual differences.

Mill's argument throughout *The Subjection of Women* is a confused mixture of these two approaches. He lurches from a less to a more radical position and back again, and this creates strain at several points. In what follows I shall try to show that although Mill is clear about what he is

³ Of course I am not claiming that Mill clearly or consistently thinks of 'utilitarian' arguments as those that confine themselves to desires and needs that people actually have, without reference to any idealizing of the situation. (If he did, there could hardly be room for controversy as to whether he espoused 'act-' or 'rule-' utilitarianism.) My distinction is intended to hold apart two lines of thought which Mill seems to employ in the essay, and they would remain distinct even if both of them were brought under the heading of some very broad conception of utilitarianism.

opposing he fails to consider that there are different possibilities on the positive side, and that different arguments carry different commitments and can be incompatible.

In the argument of Chapter 1 of the essay, Mill seems to presuppose the radical approach. He objects, for example, that the existence of patriarchy is not something that can count in its favour, because it has no theoretical basis. It is not the case that patriarchy is the result of fair experiment, trials and refutations. Experience shows us only that we *can* survive under patriarchy, not that we could not do a good deal better otherwise. So (p. 129)⁴ 'experience, in the sense in which it is vulgarly opposed to theory, cannot be pretended to have pronounced any verdict'. Further, 'the adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation, or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what conduced to the benefit of humanity or the good order of society'. It arose simply because women have always been weaker, being at a biological disadvantage. It is just 'the primitive state of slavery lasting on'. The opponent presumably wants to argue that biology is destiny; Mill's counter to this is to deny that our present experience of relations between the sexes is morally relevant at all. What matter more are considerations of what is just and right, and these cannot be read off from ordinary experience.

Mill also overrides the objection that women do not object to the present system. While insisting that some do, as is shown by franchise agitation, etc., he admits that most do not; yet insists that 'there are abundant tokens how many *would* cherish [similar aspirations] were they not so strenuously taught to repress them as contrary to the proprieties of their sex' (p. 140). He adds that the fact that each woman complains individually about her husband shows that women would collectively complain about the position of men if their education were not aimed at getting them to think of themselves as dependants with subservience to men as their natural goal. This may well be true, but it is not a datum of experience, and Mill does not think that it is; he is getting us to discount the views of most women as presently expressed. He even gets us to disallow most of what women have written as inauthentic. The desires and interests which women now have are thus not given utilitarian weighting; they are explained away, as not reflecting women's real nature.

That this is the radical and not the reformist approach is made even clearer by Mill's eloquent rejection of the opponent's claim that men and women are naturally fitted for their present functions and positions: 'What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in

⁴ All references to *The Subjection of Women* and *The Enfranchisement of Women* come from the useful collection *Essays on Sex Equality* by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, edited by A. Rossi (University of Chicago Press, 1970).

others. It may be asserted without scruple, that no other class of dependants have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relation with their masters . . . ' (p. 148). Mill insists that nobody is in a position to know anything about women's nature, because so far we have not seen anything that we could call natural; all we have seen is manifestations of the altogether understandable desire to conform to stereotype. He uses the occasion to criticize men who think, from a negligible basis, that they completely understand women. Consistently with this, Mill, in Chapter 1, uses no argument directly from what women want or can do. His main argument works by analogy: the dissatisfaction that most women feel with marriage shows that they would object to the position of men in general if it were not for the submissiveness inculcated by their education, just as complaints about misuse of tyrannical power by one class against another in the past have always led in the end to demands that the power itself should be abolished. Given Mill's strong assertions about the impossibility of demarcating female nature, this kind of argument from analogy is the most he can consistently offer.⁵

After all this, it comes as a surprise to find that in Chapter 3 Mill defends the suitability of women for public office and private employment from a position that makes quite large concessions to the opponent of Chapter 1.

Mill argues (p. 185) that if even a few women are fit to hold office then legally excluding women 'cannot be justified by any opinion which can be held respecting the capacities of women in general'. He adds, with a connection of thought which is for him uncharacteristically loose and vague, 'But, though this last consideration is not essential, it is far from being irrelevant. An unprejudiced view of it gives additional strength to the argument against the disabilities of women, and reinforces them by high considerations of practical utility.' The progress of Mill's thought here seems to be: to exclude women from jobs, etc., on the ground that they are unfit for them is irrational, because we cannot know whether they are unfit or not (never having tried). But it is *also* actually rebutted by the existence of some women who *are* fit—and if some women are fit, it must surely increase utility to include them among the employables. Mill obviously thinks that he has merely brought in a supplementary argument which will strengthen the first, and so he would have if he had stuck to the above formulation of his point; but Mill in the course of making his appeal to utility makes exactly his opponents' dubious move of arguing from a few examples to the capacity of women in general in a specific respect—e.g.

⁵ We should note in passing that this argument depends heavily on our being able to predict a very large-scale change in society from the occurrence of similar changes in the past, and also on the assumption that progress in the required direction will not be blocked by large-scale movements in society based entirely on irrational or destructive forces. Mill could not foresee the inroads made on women's rights by fascism, for example.

from a few women rulers to women's bent for the practical. Yet he had himself earlier (p. 149) pointed out the fallacy of arguing from the behaviour of a few to the behaviour of all members of a class like women or members of other nations. Worse: if, as Mill has argued at length in Chapter 1, we have no real knowledge of women's natures, then we cannot argue from some cases that women are fit to hold jobs, etc., any more than we can argue from some other cases that women are *not* fit. Indeed, this is dangerous ground for a feminist; as Mill seemed aware earlier on, there have always been many more women who have failed to rise above their education than have succeeded—that was why he was so anxious to argue that in this matter we cannot argue from experience. Yet here he seems not to see that the argument cuts both ways, and cuts more sharply against him than for him.

It seems, then, that in his anxiety to add a utilitarian argument to the argument from rights, Mill is trying to occupy ground already undercut by his own earlier arguments. This emerges strongly in the rest of the arguments of Chapter 3. Throughout them we find Mill in untypically embarrassed and tortuous positions. He demands that we 'make entire abstraction of' all considerations suggesting that differences between the sexes are the product of the suppression by education of women's natures, admitting uncomfortably that this leaves only 'a very humble ground' for women, and apparently unaware that earlier he had argued that such abstraction, far from leading to an unprejudiced view, is illegitimate.

Mill makes much of the fact that women have been excellent rulers when they have had a chance to rule. His case perhaps depends on his selection of examples (the Empresses of Russia and China have been worse, if anything, than their male counterparts); but more disturbing is the fact that he concludes that this fits what we do know of 'the peculiar tendencies and aptitudes characteristic of women' (p. 189). Women in general have a bent towards the practical. They are capable of intuitive perception of situations, 'rapid and correct insight into present fact' (p. 190). This is a talent which, while it does not fit one for scientific thought or abstract reasoning on general principles, is of great use in practical matters, where what is required is sensitivity to the realities of the present situation. Women's intuition is thus a valuable corrective to man's tendency to abstract reasoning. It prevents the latter becoming uselessly over-speculative, and it ensures that sound reasoning is put into practice in a competent way.

Here is the oldest cliché in the book: women are intuitive while men reason. If any cliché has done the most harm to the acceptance by men of women as intellectual equals, it is this, and it is distressing to see Mill come out with it. It is even more distressing to find him patronizingly recommending to any man working in a speculative subject the great value of an intuitive woman to keep him down to earth (p. 102). It is true that Mill

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prefaces these remarks with an awkward and apologetic passage (pp. 189–190) in which he says that they apply only to women in their actual state, not as they could be. None the less, it is his own choice to defend women's supposed intuition on utilitarian grounds; and a very back-handed defence it is. If it were sound, it would actually undermine many radical proposals. There would be no good ground, for example, for giving the sexes the same type of education; it would be appropriate to train boys to go in, at least predominantly, for subjects requiring analytical reasoning and development of theory, and to train women rather for subjects requiring no sustained reasoning but rather 'human contact' and easily appreciable practical applications. We do not need to be reminded that our educational system is still run largely on these assumptions, and that girls are still notoriously inhibited from going in for subjects on the science and mathematics side, particularly in mixed schools, for fear of being thought too 'masculine'.⁶ As for the utility of women's famous intuition, Mill unwittingly exposes the catch when he points out its utility for a *man* engaged in speculative thought. Why should a woman be pleased by the fact that she is a usefully earthy check on some man's theories? Instead of claiming the usefulness of this function (which is surely very limited anyway) would it not be more rational for her to claim the right to produce theories too, if she can, just as speculative as a man's, and to have them taken seriously? As long as one admits that women are intuitive and men suited to reasoning, one's best efforts at valuing women's contribution will be patronizing and damaging, encouraging women to think that the most highly regarded intellectual achievements are not for them.

No less unhappy is Mill's treatment of the objection that women have greater 'nervous susceptibility' than men and so are unfit for proper employment (p. 194). Firstly he tries to explain this supposed fact away: much of it is the result of having excess energy unused or wasted on trivia, and much is artificially cultivated as the result of an unhealthy upbringing. But he then adds that some women *do* have nervous temperaments, and tries to present this in as favourable a light as possible. He points out that it is not confined to women, that it often accompanies genius, that if allied to self-control it produces a very strong character. In short, what is wrong with being nervous and excitable? But Mill, in spite of the changed direction of his defence, is too honest to claim that excitability is really a virtue. He admits that women would do as well as men 'if their education and cultivation were adapted to correcting instead of aggravating the infirmities incidental to their temperament'. So it seems that nervous susceptibility, in spite of Mill's awkward praise of it, is a defect after all. As if realizing

⁶ In 1972, for example, the percentage of girls studying mathematics and science subjects at A-level was higher in single-sex schools than in mixed schools, tiny in both (18.7 per cent as against 13.4 per cent).

how damaging this admission is, Mill launches on to another type of defence: even if women's minds are more 'mobile' than those of men, and thus less capable of sustained intellectual effort, this does not mean that they are any the less to be valued: 'This difference is one which can only affect the kind of excellence, not the excellence itself.' Mill's confused and tangled attempts to show the useful qualities of women's special way of thinking thus ends up with the dangerous cliché so beloved of inegalitarians: women are not *inferior* to men, just *different*.

It is no accident that efforts to get the position of women improved by praising their special, womanly qualities usually end up in a position very similar to that of the opposition, with merely a difference of emphasis. This is because, as Mill so clearly saw in Chapter 1, the special qualities that are ascribed to women, and for which they are praised, are created within a male-dominated society, and it is very unlikely that the roles that give them content can within that society achieve a genuinely high value. Their qualities are the qualities of the inferior, and praising them will not make their owners equal—indeed, it may well have the opposite effect by encouraging women to fall back lazily on their 'female intuitions' rather than learn to argue on equal terms with men. Mill sees very clearly what is wrong and harmful with the Victorian praise of women for having more moral virtue than men. It is surprising that he does not see what is wrong with his own very similar attempts to praise women as less abstractly rational than men and more sensitive to the human dimension.

Mill's discomforts increase when he comes to deal with the alleged fact that men have bigger brains than women. Firstly he dismisses it quite decisively: the alleged fact is dubious; anyway the principle appealed to is ridiculous, for according to it whales would be much more intelligent than men; further, the relationship between size of brain and quality of mind is, to say the least, not the subject of general agreement. But then, amazingly, he backtracks and admits that probably men do have bigger brains than women, but slower cerebral circulation; this would explain why men's thoughts are slower and steadier, while women's are more rapid and ephemeral! This is the only place in *The Subjection of Women* where the argument is quite pathetic, and one is mainly surprised that Mill feels that he needs to argue at all on this level. That he does can only be put down to his anxiety to add as many arguments as possible based upon women's actual (and supposedly actual) qualities, in spite of having pointed out clearly all the pitfalls of this approach in Chapter 1.

As if unhappy about this argument, Mill repeats his sound earlier point that we can know practically nothing about natural differences, because of the meagreness of the research done so far and the inevitability of cultural prejudices. At once he disregards his own good advice and starts speculating on the possible causes of what is represented as the greatest difference between the sexes, namely that there have been no great women philoso-

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phers, artists, etc. He defends this uneasily: 'I am not about to attempt what I have pronounced impossible; but doubt does not forbid conjecture'. But Mill's tone is not subsequently very tentative; and in any case he has already shown amply the futility of all such conjectures, if women's natures have been systematically deformed by their upbringing in male-dominated society. He now, however, takes seriously the question, 'Why have there been no great women artists, etc.?' as a question to be answered by appealing to actually existing features of women's character.

He begins by saying that it is not surprising that there have been no women geniuses, since it has not been very long since women could even enter the stakes for intellectual excellence. This looks at first like a good argument, but if one looks at the facts more closely a good deal of its force seems to evaporate. It cannot explain why women have been so much more prominent in fields like literature than in fields like the visual arts, when they have been open to them for roughly the same length of time.⁷ Mill speaks as though women have made slow but increasing progress on all fronts, uniformly achieving competence so far but nothing great. One begins to suspect that he is dominated by a linear picture of Progress.

Even without any belief in Progress, however, one can agree that women have not so far (even now, to any extent) 'produced any of those great and luminous new ideas which form an era in thought, nor those fundamentally new conceptions in art, which open a vista of possible effects not before thought of, and found a new school' (p. 204). Mill's explanation is strange and forced. He argues that in the past, when 'great and fruitful new truths could be arrived at by mere force of genius' women were socially prevented from artistic expression, and nowadays, when the latter is no longer the case, few women have the erudition required to say something new. In other words, women were not allowed to join in when originality was easy to come by, and now when it is hard to come by they start with an educational handicap. Mill seems to be thinking of culture as cumulative, each generation having more homework to get through before they can add anything new. What is puzzling is why he thinks he needs this bizarre and implausible picture. For he has already made clear at some length why it is unlikely that a woman could come out with a profoundly original idea; women are not brought up to be self-reliant and are much more likely (like Harriet Taylor) to express their best insights through the work of some man.

Equally bizarre is Mill's explanation of why women's literature has been so derivative from that of men. He compares it with that of the Romans,

⁷ For some preliminary clarifications on this, see the excellent article by L. Nochlin, 'Why are there no great women artists?' in *Women in Sexist Society*, Gornick and Moran (eds.), also (abbreviated) in *Art and Sexual Politics*, Hess and Baker (eds.).

who found a whole literature, the Greek, already in existence when they began to write. But surely *all* writers, men and women, stand to earlier literary achievements as the Romans stood to the Greeks. The comparison also renders wholly inappropriate Mill's claim that in time women will come to write their own original literature. But in any case he has already provided us with the real answer, or at least part of it, back in Chapter 1: 'The greater part of what women write about women is mere sycophancy to men' (p. 153). The dependence displayed by women who falsify their own experience to fulfil male expectations is quite unlike the literary dependence of the Romans on the Greeks.

Mill's awkwardness in arguing on his chosen humble ground shows up most clearly when he points out that women fail to achieve works of genius partly because they lack ambition to immortalize their names—'whether the cause be natural or artificial'—this in spite of the fact that he has already shown at length that it is unreasonable to think that women are naturally passive and spiritless, just as it is in the case of serfs or black slaves; the limitations and narrow focus of their standard ambitions are quite adequately explained by their upbringing and the expectations of the roles they fill.

Mill's attempts in Chapter 3 to argue for reform on utilitarian grounds, basing himself on women's natures as they are, amount to total failure. I have dwelt on these arguments at length because they are so unexpectedly bizarre and weak; Mill's awkwardness betrays his confusion as again and again he puts forward grounds which are undermined by his own earlier arguments.

Mill seems unaware of this, as he seems likewise to be unaware that Chapter 3 is not co-tenable with some of the arguments of Chapter 4 either.

In Chapter 4 he argues that great benefits will accrue from the liberation of women, including among these the vast improvement of women's influence over men. He describes how as things are a woman is nearly always a moral drag on her husband; her narrow conception of their interests often forces him to sacrifice principle to money and status. 'Whoever has a wife and children has given hostages to Mrs Grundy' (p. 229). Mill's eulogy of marriage as between equals gives great emphasis to the unsatisfactory nature of marriage as it is, largely on the ground that artificially fostered differences of tastes and inclinations make the marriage something that lowers the husband intellectually and morally. We are told similarly that liberated women will help others in a useful and rational way, rather than putting their energy into harmful and patronizing charity, as at present; again there is much stress on the improvements from others' points of view if women are liberated from their present rigid and thwarted characters. Now even if this long catalogue of women's shortcomings is true, it should make one wonder afresh what the status of the arguments in

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Chapter 3 can possibly be. If women's influence as it stands is baneful, why should we hasten to employ women in public and private jobs? What can be the utility of pressing into service all these narrow and repressed natures? And can women's vaunted intuition and nervous susceptibility be worth very much after all, if their effects are those described in Chapter 4? Mill cannot have it both ways. If women even as they are deserve employment in the same way as men, then there is no reason to think that a fundamental change of the relations between the sexes will bring great benefits. On the other hand, if a great change here *will* bring vast benefits, is it not suspicious to try to increase utility by making use of women in their present corrupted state?

Apart from the conflicts I have tried to draw out between Chapter 3 and Chapters 1 and 4, there are less localized signs throughout the essay that Mill is having trouble in combining his different arguments. One is his struggle with 'nature'. We are told over and over again that we cannot read off women's nature from their present state. On the other hand, we are assured that women are schooled into suppressing their desires for freedom and self-expression 'in their natural and most healthy direction' (p. 238).⁸ So we are to be stopped from arguing that it is natural for women to be passive, but we must argue that it is natural for them to want to be free and self-determining in the way that men are. It is not clear, in fact, that there is a real incoherence here. What is needed is a distinction between facts about human nature that can be supported by some very general theory, and supposed facts that are merely superficial inferences from what happens to be observed. But none of this is made clear in *The Subjection of Women* itself; the reader is left with the impression that nature has been expelled from the argument as an enemy only to be brought in again by the back door.

A more troubling problem is that it is constantly unclear, throughout the essay, just what changes Mill thinks *are* appropriate. Since he is so insistent that women are not constrained by natural inferiority, and repeats several times that what is desirable is that the sexes compete on an equal basis, one would assume that he thinks that women and men will tend to fill the same roles; his remarks at the theoretical level would all tend to imply the radical approach. Yet what he actually says on the subject is timid and reformist at best. He assumes that most women will in fact want only to be wives and mothers, 'the one vocation in which there is nobody to compete with them' (p. 183)—which is not even true, if we mean child-rearing and not just the physical process of birth. He thinks it undesirable for the wife to earn as well as the husband, for having a job will make a woman neglect

⁸ Cf. the quotation on p. 182; and what is said about equality on p. 173: 'society in equality is its normal state'. This is hardly something we can learn from experience, when history presents us with nothing but hierarchies.

the home and family. He argues that to have self-respect a woman must be *able* to earn her own living, but that in fact few women will, and he seems to envisage jobs being held only by the unmarried, or by middle-aged women whose children have grown up. This is clearly most unsatisfactory. How can women's education be a serious affair if it is known that most will not use it? In any case, how can it be argued that women really do want to be free and equal with men, and have political and educational parity, if it is taken to be a fact that the reformed state of affairs will make no difference to the majority of women? Mill's position here seems to be simply confused, because he is trying to argue both from the way women actually are, and from their right to become entirely different.

So far I have pointed to some confusions that arise from the fact that Mill attempts to combine the radical approach with the reformist approach. I shall finally try to show that the radical argument as it appears in Chapter 4 creates a further problem for Mill if he wants to apply utilitarian considerations.

In Chapter 4 Mill sets himself to answer the question 'which will be asked the most importunately by those opponents whose conviction is somewhat shaken on the main point. What good are we to expect from the changes proposed in our customs and institutions? Would mankind be at all better off if women were free?' (p. 216). This looks like a utilitarian argument, and Mill in fact goes on to list advantages to be gained from the liberation of women. However, though it is clearly an appeal to consequences, the argument cannot be utilitarian in the present restricted sense of taking into account only people's actual desires and needs; for what Mill cites as benefits would often only satisfy people *already* liberated from former attitudes. He first, for example, mentions the benefit of having the most basic human relationship run justly instead of unjustly; but if most people in a society are not liberated, they will presumably not see the present system of relations between the sexes as unjust, nor see anything wrong with the attitudes engendered by it. This comes out clearly from Mill's eloquent passage on the selfish and self-worshipping attitudes encouraged in men under patriarchy (pp. 218–220). The obvious retort to this is that, if it is true, then most men would not think of change as a *benefit*. Why should men want to change a system so favourable to themselves? Mill assumes that they will do so when they see the injustice of it; but that is the whole problem, for he has emphasized the way they are brought up to accept it as perfectly natural and just.

Similar remarks apply to what Mill says about the increase in happiness in marriage when it becomes a union of equals. Mill assumes that men will appreciate the greater preferability of a rational union between equals rather than a marriage where the husband has all the authority and all the wife does is obey. 'What . . . does the man obtain by it, except an upper servant, a nurse or a mistress?' (p. 233). But what if men have been so

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brought up that that is precisely what they do want out of a marriage? Should these desires not count? As we are aware from Rawls,⁹ Mill will have trouble finding a utilitarian ground for discounting desires that can only be satisfied in an unjust system because they are engendered within it. Mill clearly thinks that these desires should *not* count, any more than women's expressed desires to remain happily dominated by men should count; they show nothing except how warped the nature of both men and women can get. But his justification for doing this cannot be a utilitarian one.

This means that Mill faces more of a problem than he is aware of when he represents the effects of liberation as uncontroversially benefits. In any society hitherto, Mill's or ours, the number of people, men and women, who are dissatisfied with the present state of relations between the sexes is very small. Not only do most men derive satisfaction from their dominant position, and would resent its removal; most women accept their position and do not see it as unjust.¹⁰ So for the effects of liberation such as Mill details to be generally agreed to be benefits, there would have to be large-scale changes in people's desires, and for this to come about there would have to be fundamental changes in the way both sexes think about sex differences and sex roles. Nowadays we know that this entails changes right from the beginning of education; if girls and boys learn from books where sexual stereotypes are presented, they will naturally tend to perpetuate those stereotypes. Our whole approach to education has to be changed if people are not to continue to learn the attitudes which lead to discrimination even where legal disabilities disappear.

In this respect there is some truth in the accusation that Mill's thinking about sexual differences is shallow. He is not aware of the massive changes required in people's desires and outlooks before sexual equality becomes a reality and its effects something that people see as beneficial. Consequently, he does not pay enough attention to the extensive interference in people's lives necessary to ensure that the liberation of women becomes a real change and not just the same attitudes under another name. He rejects reverse discrimination, and says nothing about re-educating people's desires by reforming school-books, etc. If he had been aware of this, he might, as an individualist, have been disturbed. We know from *On Liberty* how he rejects, as unjustified, state interference in people's lives even

⁹ Mostly in part I of *A Theory of Justice*.

¹⁰ One small but striking example (quoted from the *Daily Telegraph* of 16 December 1963 by J. Mitchell, *Women's Estate* p. 126): 'All four hundred employees at the Typhoo Tea Works, Birmingham, went on unofficial strike yesterday because a forewoman reprimanded a workman. A shop-steward said, "The forewoman should have referred any question of discipline to the man's foreman . . ."'. 470 people, in fact, struck over this issue; 300 of them were women.

where this would be agreed to lead to moral improvement. He regards Prohibition as completely unjustifiable, though all would agree that it is better and morally preferable to be without drunkenness and its results. Presumably he would feel quite unhappy about state-aided programmes to help women, quotas for employing women, revision of books, etc. There is a real problem here, since the only effective means of removing injustice appears to involve injustice itself. Mill never faces this problem because he does not see the extent to which people have to be forcibly led to make sexual equality work. In this sense Mill is too much of a rationalist about sex and sexual roles; what is wrong is not that he lacked Freud's supposed truths but that he assumes that when people clearly perceive the injustice of sexual inequality they will come to desire its removal, and find greater satisfaction in liberation from it. But unfortunately this is not true.

In *The Subjection of Women*, then, Mill is sure what he is against, but he is not sure whether he is committed to a radical or a reformist approach, and in trying to have it both ways blurs what he is saying.¹¹ He has seen neither the problems inherent in pressing the argument from the benefits of liberation, given his individualistic beliefs, nor the difficulties lurking in his attempt to combine both his main lines of thought.

It is intriguing here to notice the way in which *The Subjection of Women* contrasts with an earlier essay on the same theme, *The Enfranchisement of Women*. There are three points at which, by adopting a more radical position than *The Subjection of Women*, and ignoring or rejecting the reformist approach, it achieves a more consistent and stronger argument.

Firstly, *The Enfranchisement of Women* argues firmly that 'The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to. What this is, cannot be ascertained, without complete liberty of choice' (p. 100). It is therefore a complete waste of time to argue about women's peculiar aptitudes or capacities. What women are like, and are able to do, will be decided by what they actually do when they are free to have a choice, and in no other way. Thus we find avoided, and on clear grounds, Mill's various disastrous attempts to argue, in Chapter 3 of *The Subjection of Women*, the usefulness of women's 'special gifts', intuitions, etc. Like Mill, the author of the earlier essay says that it cannot be true that women are incapable of political life on the basis of there having been capable women rulers, but because no attempt is made to argue from a few

¹¹ Commentators generally see one or the other strand, but not the fact that Mill combines both. McCloskey curtly sums up the essay by saying (op. cit., p. 136), 'Obviously the utilitarian arguments [from the abuses of power, etc.] have greater force and relevance here than elsewhere'. Ryan, on the other hand, sums up just as curtly (op. cit., pp. 157–158), 'the argument is essentially the argument from individuality', and notes that arguing 'for the higher and better happiness which stems from self-respect and personal autonomy' is 'not a very obviously utilitarian appeal'.

examples to a supposed fitness for practical matters on the part of all women, there is no incompatibility with the main line of argument.

Secondly, *The Enfranchisement of Women* argues that women should earn a living (p. 105). Where Mill was confused and cool towards this, the earlier essay argues that it would be a good thing even if the effect on wages were all that the most alarmist suggest. Even if man and wife together earned only what he earns now, 'how infinitely preferable is it that part of the income should be of the woman's earning, . . . rather than that she should be compelled to stand aside in order that men may be the sole earners, and the sole dispensers of what is earned'. Women discover self-respect if they earn, and equality of standing with the man; and this is much more important, from the viewpoint of sound relationships between the sexes, than mere economic improvement in the family position. How much more realistic this is than Mill's timid declaration that a woman should draw self-respect from an ability to earn which she in fact makes no use of when married. His position here is sentimental; the earlier essay is more aware of the realities of power.

It is also clear that if women are really to have equality, their education must be seriously intended to fit them for serious jobs. Here the author foresees conflict with what are called 'the moderate reformers of the education of women', which would appear to include the author of *The Subjection of Women*. Women should be taught 'solid instruction', not 'superficial instruction on solid subjects'. They must be educated in a way that makes them independent beings; it is merely fudging the issue to bring them up to be fit companions for men who will none the less do all the earning and thus retain all the economic power. Mill's confused and sentimental position is here demolished with a few effective words: 'they do not say that men should be educated to be the companions of women'.

Lastly, *The Enfranchisement of Women* is both frank and clear about the claim that liberation will lead to greater happiness for women (pp. 117 ff.). Women are not in general aware of frustration, and tend not to feel their position intolerable, but this does not matter: Asian women do not mind being in purdah, and find the thought of going about freely shocking, but this does not mean that they should not be liberated from seclusion, or that they would not appreciate freedom once they had it; and the same holds for European women who cannot appreciate why it is important for them to be financially independent. 'The vast population of Asia do not desire or value, probably would not accept, political liberty, nor the savages of the forest, civilization; which does not prove that either of those things is undesirable for them, or that they will not, at some future time, enjoy it' (p. 117). This is a bold but consistent position: people's present desires are discounted in favour of the desires that would be had if their natural selves were not repressed. Here we find the radical approach put forward boldly, with no attempt at compromise with the reformist approach; and the application to

women is made straightforwardly. 'How does the objector know that women do not desire equality and freedom? He never knew a woman who did not, or would not, desire it for herself individually. It would be very simple to suppose, that if they do desire it they will say so. Their position is like that of the tenants or labourers who vote against their own political interests to please their landlords or employers; with the unique addition, that submission is inculcated on them from childhood, as the peculiar grace and attraction of their character' (p. 118).

The earlier essay is thus more coherent as argument than the later; it quite avoids the struggles that occupy Mill over natural differences, and it avoids his tendency to lapse back into a more timid position than his radical premises would suggest.

I have so far spoken non-committally about 'the author of *The Enfranchisement of Women*' because there is some uncertainty about whom to call the author. It was published under Mill's name, but in an introduction to it Mill says that it is Harriet's work, in a stronger and more definite way than in his customary avowals of general intellectual indebtedness.¹² Taking it to be Harriet's work would certainly offer a neat solution to the problem of the discrepancies I have noted. However, I do not wish here to make a contribution to the debate about the extent of Harriet's contributions to Mill's work, which is too complicated a topic to raise here. What is important is simply that *The Subjection of Women* puts forward a position more complicated (as well as more lengthily expressed) than that of *The Enfranchisement of Women*, and in the process, I maintain, introduces deep confusions. It is certainly true that the position put forward in the earlier essay needs much more argument to back up its basic premises before it can be regarded as defensible; but at least it is clear and provides a basis for a coherent practical programme. In *The Subjection of Women*, I believe, we can see Mill doing something strikingly similar to what he does in *Utilitarianism*. Anxious to do justice to all sides of a question he sees to be complex and important, and unwilling to commit himself definitively to one simple line of thought, he qualifies an originally bold and straightforward theory to the point of inconsistency.¹³

St Hugh's College, Oxford

¹² '... the following Essay is hers in a peculiar sense, my share in it being little more than that of an editor and amanuensis. Its authorship having been known at the time and publicly attributed to her' (p. 91). Rossi (pp. 41–43) discusses other evidence for Harriet's authorship, which she accepts.

¹³ I am grateful for helpful comments and discussion to A. O. J. Cockshut, J. Dybikowski and G. Segal.