

John Stuart Mill

Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy *Abridged*

Edited, with Introduction, by
Stephen Nathanson

JOHN STUART MILL



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Economy

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Abridged Edition

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION



In many cases, when classic works are republished, their intellectual or literary value is widely recognized. If the work's reappearance raises any question, it is a question addressed to readers: "why have you not yet read this book?" When a long neglected work is republished, however, its history of neglect raises the question: "why read this book?" If generations of serious readers have thought it could be safely ignored, perhaps there is no reason to attend to it now.

John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* falls into this second category. It is a *former* classic. First published in 1848, it quickly became the bible of 19th century English economics. Seven editions appeared during Mill's lifetime, the last in 1871, and Mill both updated the book and made some substantial revisions to it. It continued to be reprinted after his death and was widely read for a long time.

Nonetheless, Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* is not widely read today and is generally ignored both by economists and philosophers. This neglect is understandable. The book is long (about a thousand pages), and many parts are either genuinely or apparently obsolete. One of Mill's aims in writing the book was to explain the state of economics at the time he wrote. As changes occurred within economics, much of what he had to say was superseded by later work. The theoretical parts ceased to be of interest to economists, and the many applications to current issues of Mill's time appeared less and less relevant as time passed.

The book has been neglected by philosophers for different reasons, having to do both with the book itself and with changing conceptions of the role of philosophy. Perhaps the primary reason for philosophical neglect is that *Principles of Political Economy* does not look like a philosophical work. Its title and organization reflect a focus on economic laws and phenomena. The first three of the five books that make up the volume are entitled: Production, Distribution, and Exchange. There is also a lot of empirical information about forms of

agriculture, worker cooperatives, international trade, problems in Ireland, colonization, and other apparently unphilosophical topics.

Nonetheless, much of the material in Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* is quite important, and its neglect has been a misfortune. Mill's insights on economic matters—including, for example, his emphasis on the historical, social, and cultural factors that determine the level of productivity in a society—have been ignored by later economists, sometimes with dire effects. These factors were overlooked, for example, by those who believed that market economies could easily be transported to former members of the Soviet Union after its collapse. While Mill emphasizes the many political, social, and cultural underpinnings of successful economies, later economic policy makers seem to have taken literally the equation of a market economy with a policy of “laissez-faire.” This has led to the notion that all one has to do in order to produce a successful economy is to leave things alone. Mill would not have made this mistake, and his views on this and many other matters are still relevant to economics and economic policy-making.

There are two reasons why the material in *Principles of Political Economy* is philosophically important. First, Mill is an important thinker whose other works are widely read and studied. Given that his stature among 19th century political philosophers is challenged only by that of Karl Marx, the interpretation of Mill's views is a matter of both interest and importance. Yet, the understanding of Mill has been diminished by a lack of attention to a book that is, in fact, his most substantial single work in what we might broadly call social ethics. The full title of the book—*Principles of Political Economy With Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*—makes clear that it forms a part of Mill's social and political philosophy. In fact, he could have called it *The Principles of Social Philosophy With Some of Their Applications to Political Economy*. In his autobiography, he made this point himself, saying that

it was not a book merely of abstract science, but also of application, and treated *Political Economy* not as a thing by itself, but as a fragment of a greater whole; a branch of Social Philosophy. . . .¹

One virtue of *Principles of Political Economy* is that it contains extended discussions of many important issues of economic and social policy. This is in contrast with Mill's most widely read moral and political works, *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*, both of which are

¹ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 200.

relatively short. It is hard to see how one could hope to understand Mill's moral and political thinking without reading his most extensive work on matters of economic and social policy, even if those discussions are interspersed among other matters that do not seem as relevant philosophically.

But *Principles of Political Economy* is much more than a gateway into the mind of a highly respected thinker. It is also a rich and serious discussion of many economic, social, and political problems that were pressing issues in Mill's time and that remain pressing issues in our own time. In Mill's time and in ours, people have been confronted with the twin problems of creating productive economies and of designing institutions to insure a just distribution of the fruits of economic productivity. In addition, debates then and now focus on the proper role of government and its relation to market institutions, on problems of poverty and deprivation and whether and how they can be solved or alleviated, and on what are the fairest, most efficient ways to administer taxes.

Many discussions of these issues, both in Mill's time and at present, are highly partisan, even propagandistic. As in Mill's day, many people today have strongly held views about these matters and often appeal to ideas about human nature and human societies as well as to various moral principles to justify their views. At the same time, people are often ignorant about facts, don't understand the social phenomena that they are dealing with, and are both unclear and inconsistent in the interpretation and application of the principles they use to justify the policies they support.

Mill approached the problems of his day with the belief that social progress could be made only if people understood the relevant facts and embraced correct and useful principles for evaluating institutions and policies. He himself was an extraordinarily careful, knowledgeable, and undogmatic thinker, and in *Principles of Political Economy*, he combines an attempt to explain how economic systems work with a search for the right principles to use in evaluating economic and social policies. There is much to be learned from his discussions of particular problems, principles, and policies, and from the methods that he uses for trying to understand social issues in a serious way.

In short, a major reason for reading Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* is that there is much that we can learn from it about issues that we still face. Even where we think Mill goes wrong, reading him can still deepen our understanding of important issues and help us to improve our thinking about them. With the widespread revival of

interest in applying philosophical ideas to practical realities, the time is ripe for Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* to receive the attention it deserves.

A Key Problem in Understanding Mill's Philosophy

Mill established his reputation as a thinker through the publication of his *Logic* in 1843 and *Principles of Political Economy* in 1848. It was not until later in life that he published the books for which he is most remembered, *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1863). These two works are among the most widely read and discussed works in moral and political philosophy.

Utilitarianism and *On Liberty* are both shorter and more narrowly focused than *Principles of Political Economy*. *Principles of Political Economy* is a survey of an entire field, while *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty* are each devoted to defending a single principle that is supposed to provide guidance in making moral and political judgments. Although neither of these later books contains an elaborate or esoteric system, there is a good deal of controversy about their correct interpretation. One reason for this controversy is that the single principle of *Utilitarianism* does not appear to be consistent with the single principle of *On Liberty*. If they do not fit together, then Mill did not have a consistent overall philosophy of morality and politics. If we think he had a coherent, overall philosophy, we need to understand how these two works fit together as part of a larger whole.² Since *Principles of Political Economy* deals with related issues, it may help us to solve this problem.

The dominant influence on Mill's thinking was the utilitarian philosophy. Mill, who was born in 1806, grew up in an environment in which social reform and the utilitarian ethic of Jeremy Bentham were pervasive influences. James Mill, his father, was an important promoter of Bentham's ideas—or, one might say, Bentham's *idea*, since Bentham had one basic idea which he applied in great detail to many legal, political, and economic issues. This basic idea was that the goal of all moral, political, and individ-

² The inconsistency problem and competing interpretations of Mill are described in John Gray, *Mill on Liberty: A Defence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), ch. 1; see also Gray's "John Stuart Mill: Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations," online at <http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/LtrLbrty/gryMTR1.htm>. [8/19/03]

ual decision making should be the promotion of the greatest amount of happiness or well-being. All actions, laws, and policies are to be judged as right or wrong in accord with their tendency to produce good or bad results. Spurred by this idea, Bentham, James Mill, and others sought radical changes in the laws and practices of their day. Judging the status quo as a failure, they worked tirelessly to bring about improvement.

From a very young age, John Stuart Mill was educated by his father and groomed to carry on the utilitarian reform program after the deaths of Bentham and James Mill. The tale of this extraordinary education is most famously related in Mill's *Autobiography*. But a point worth noting is that Mill not only knew of these ideas, but he grew up with their promoters. Bentham was a longtime friend of the family and provided summer lodging for the Mill family. Other important figures—such as the economist David Ricardo and John Austin, author of *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined*—were also friends of the Mills. Even as a child, Mill was literally immersed in the program of political critique and reform that was the central focus of his father's life.

In his early twenties, Mill suffered a psychological breakdown which he vividly describes in his autobiography.³ As he tells it, a crucial part of his recovery came about through the discovery of romantic poetry. This led him to something of a rebellion, as he tried to free himself from what he saw as the excessive narrowness of vision that he found in his father's and in Bentham's utilitarian philosophy. This rebellion was further enhanced by his deep friendship with Harriet Taylor, a married woman with whom he fell in love in 1830 and eventually married after her husband's death in 1851. According to Mill, Harriet Taylor's views helped to broaden his own thinking and contributed further to his move away from the ideas of his youth. He credited her as the main source of many of his later ideas and insights and, in fact, referred to many of his works, including *Principles of Political Economy*, as their "joint production."⁴

³ For accounts of Mill's breakdown, see Mill's *Autobiography*, as well as Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), 74–86; and Alan Ryan, *J. S. Mill* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), which also provides an interesting discussion of Mill's purposes in writing the *Autobiography*.

⁴ Mill uses this phrase in his description of Harriet Taylor's role in his writing. See his *Autobiography*, 204–14. For discussions of Mill's relationship with Harriet Taylor and her influence on his thinking, see F. Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor*

In spite of these significant changes in view, which Mill perhaps best elaborated in his essays on Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he never entirely rejected either the utilitarian theory or the political reform program of Bentham and James Mill. He did revise their view that pleasure is the only good so as to make room for a distinction between higher and lower pleasures, and he revised their psychological view that people always seek their own good. In addition, he rejected some of their views about how social and political reform could best be achieved. But he remained committed to a version of the utilitarian philosophy, and he dedicated much of his life to promoting a wide range of social and political reforms that were meant to improve people's lives.

Indeed, all of his major writings were motivated by the desire to reform society and by the belief that the spread of knowledge was essential to meaningful reform. While he aimed for scientific rigor, he also wanted practical effects and as large an audience as possible. Describing his aims in the preface to the first edition of *Principles of Political Economy*, he tells us that while his "object is practical, and, as far as the nature of the subject admits, popular," he had "not attempted to purchase either of those advantages by the sacrifice of strict scientific reasoning."

Like his father and Bentham, Mill's motives were practical, even though his means were intellectual. The point was to bring about meaningful reforms in social and political practices, and like his father and Bentham, he always understood meaningful reform as changes that improved people's lives. In this sense, the utilitarian goal of achieving what Bentham called "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" remained at the core of Mill's practical and theoretical thinking.

After his breakdown, however, Mill was much influenced by a number of romantic thinkers, and one result of this was an increased appreciation of the importance of human individuality. In addition, he took seriously Alexis de Tocqueville's concern that the growth of democratic societies would create a powerful social ethos that was hostile to individuality. Mill came to believe that individual freedom needed to be protected both from governmental laws and from

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*; and Jo Ellen Jacobs, *The Voice of Harriet Taylor Mill* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002).

informal social pressures toward conformity. These concerns eventually led to his writing *On Liberty*, a work whose theoretical purpose was to determine “the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual” and whose practical purpose was to protect individual liberty from the illegitimate encroachments of society.⁵

On Liberty sets forth what Mill called “one very simple principle” to serve as a criterion for determining what forms of interference with individual liberty are legitimate.⁶ According to Mill, the simple principle is that the only legitimate reason for society to interfere with individual action is to prevent harm to others. Apart from acts that harm others, individuals are supposed to possess a sphere of complete autonomy. Even actions that are viewed as sinful or unwise must be permitted so long as they do not harm others. *On Liberty* is devoted to developing and defending this view. It is a powerful and inspiring work that contains some of Mill's most passionate writing.

But is the simple principle at the heart of *On Liberty* consistent with the simple utilitarian principle that he defends in *Utilitarianism*? A long line of thinkers have thought that the clear answer was “no.”⁷ Yet Mill certainly thought they fit together. Indeed, he claims in *On Liberty* that he regards utility as “the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” and that the liberty principle is the best principle to promote “the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.”⁸

The problem is that Mill the individualist and Mill the utilitarian may seem like two different thinkers. After all, if the greatest good could be achieved by violating the liberty principle, then the utilitarian Mill would be committed to limiting individual freedom. At the same time, if individual freedom is never to be interfered with except when one person is going to harm another, then the utilitarian goal of maximizing well-being must give way before the demand to respect individual action. To take a specific, contemporary example: the Mill of *On Liberty* appears committed to allowing motorcyclists to ride without helmets, since only they themselves will be harmed if

⁵ *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), 1.

⁶ *On Liberty*, 9.

⁷ One early critic who made this claim was James Fitzjames Stephens in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, 1873.

⁸ *On Liberty*, 10.

they suffer serious damage in an accident. But the Mill of *Utilitarianism* appears committed to requiring motorcycle helmets, since wearing a helmet can greatly diminish the negative effects of an accident. Liberty appears to be promoted by allowing motorcyclists not to wear a helmet, while utility is promoted by requiring that helmets be worn.

On the face of it, the two principles that Mill so ardently championed in his lifetime do not appear to be consistent with one another. This raises two problems, one regarding our understanding of Mill and one regarding our own situation. The problem concerning Mill is this: if the inconsistency between his two principles seems so obvious, how could he have thought that they fit together as part of a coherent, overall view? If we cannot understand this, then at a certain level, we cannot understand his overall moral and political philosophy. If Mill's philosophy is inconsistent, however, it is nothing for the rest of us to gloat over. Like Mill, most of us probably have some sympathy both for the overall betterment of human life expressed by his utilitarianism and for the values of liberty and individuality that Mill defended with his liberty principle. If there is no way for Mill to make these values consistent with one another, there may be no way for the rest of us to do so either. His problem is our problem too.

Liberty and Utility in *Principles of Political Economy*

Conflicts between utility and liberty also arise regarding the economic and political issues that Mill discusses in *Principles of Political Economy*. It does not take a deep knowledge of the world to be aware of the fact that some people are extraordinarily wealthy while others are desperately poor. Likewise, while many people work very hard for very little, others work little—or not at all—for much. Moreover, these differences have a powerful impact on people's level of well-being. Wealthy people have enough excess money to be able to purchase expensive homes, yachts, jewelry, and other luxury items. They can use vast resources to satisfy their smallest whims. At the same time, poor people may not have enough money to buy food or clothing. They may not be able to afford medical care or decent housing. All of this diminishes their level of well-being.

An awareness of this situation leads to the thought that one could do more good by distributing some of the wealth now possessed by

well-off people to those who are desperately poor. If this wealth were redistributed, well-off people would still be at a high level of well-being, while poor people could have their situation improved a great deal. In such a case, a committed utilitarian would favor redistributionist policies. Of course, if there are other negative effects of redistribution that would diminish overall well-being, then the utilitarian would not support redistribution. But if the overall effects of redistribution lead to improvements in overall well-being, utilitarians would favor a policy of giving more resources to the needy, even if this requires using the coercive powers of government to accomplish this result. Given Mill's commitment to utilitarianism, he ought to be at least open to such proposals.

But what would Mill the defender of individual liberty say? After all, the wealthy person may not have performed any actions that harmed the poor. According to the Mill of *On Liberty*, if we cannot find any way in which the wealthy person has harmed the poor, then there is no legitimate ground for interfering with the freedom of the wealthy person, including the freedom to retain her wealth. Following this line of reasoning, the Mill of *On Liberty* would reject calls for redistribution and assistance to the poor. Of course, the liberty principle permits well-off people to engage in charity toward the poor, but that is different from the coerced assistance involved in tax-supported government programs.

We can see the conflict more sharply by citing Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, a prominent libertarian work that opposes governmental efforts to assist the poor or guarantee economic resources to anyone. Nozick describes his book's overall position in language that echoes parts of Mill's *On Liberty*:

Our main conclusions about the state are that a minimal state, limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on, is justified; that any more extensive state will violate person's rights not to be forced to do certain things, and is unjustified. . . . Two noteworthy implications are that the state may not use its coercive apparatus for the purpose of getting some citizens to aid others, or in order to prohibit activities to people for their own good or protection.⁹

Given Mill's commitment to the view that the state may coerce people only to prevent them from harming others and his explicit

⁹ *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), ix.

rejection of paternalism in *On Liberty*, it is quite natural to think that Mill would have agreed with Nozick's rejection of welfare state activities that go beyond harm prevention and seek to promote people's well-being.¹⁰

This conclusion is supported by Joel Feinberg's influential interpretation of Mill's views on the scope of the law. According to Feinberg, one of the principles that Mill rejects in *On Liberty* is the "welfare" or "benefit to others" principle.¹¹ Mill accepts coercion to prevent harm to others but not to force assistance to others. If this is correct, then Nozick's economic libertarianism would seem to follow from Mill's liberty principle. That is, if people freely exchange goods and money and do not use force or fraud in their transactions, then the results of those transactions should not be interfered with, even if some people end up badly in this system.

These interpretations of Mill, which draw exclusively on *On Liberty*, are related to an often repeated view about the development of liberalism. It is often claimed that the original liberals were dedicated to a free market economy, inviolable property rights, and minimal government, and that liberalism was corrupted in the 20th century when it was taken over by advocates of the welfare state. In *Capitalism and Freedom*, for example, Milton Friedman writes:

As it developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the intellectual movement that went under the name liberalism emphasized freedom as the ultimate goal. It supported laissez faire . . . as a means of reducing the role of the state in economic affairs and thereby enlarging the role of the individual. . . . Beginning in the late nineteenth century, and especially after 1930 in the United States, the term liberalism came to be associated with a very different emphasis, particularly in economic policy. It came to be associated with a readiness to rely primarily on the state rather than on private voluntary arrangements to achieve objectives regarded as desirable. The catchwords became welfare and equality rather than freedom.¹²

¹⁰ I discuss Nozick's views as well as the general arguments for and against capitalism, socialism, and the welfare state in *Economic Justice* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1998).

¹¹ Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 25–34. See also, Feinberg's *Harm to Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 11–12.

¹² Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 5.

Yet Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* shows that by the mid-19th century, a preeminent liberal thinker believed that government intervention could often serve the cause of liberty and that the ultimate test of government action was its impact on human well-being. The motivations and concerns that Friedman attributes to 20th century liberals can all be found in Mill.

What we learn from *Principles of Political Economy* is that Mill's overall philosophy cannot be equated either with Nozick's libertarianism or with the restrictive view of legitimate state action that Feinberg and others attribute to Mill. Even if these interpretations make sense with respect to *On Liberty*, they take no account of what Mill wrote in his other works.

Readers who base their interpretation of Mill's philosophy on *On Liberty* alone will be surprised and puzzled by many of Mill's remarks in *Principles of Political Economy* and by his descriptions of his own views in the *Autobiography*. Here is a small sampling:

- In his preface to the second edition of *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill says that he had not intended his first edition criticisms to be understood as a "general condemnation" of socialism.
- In the *Autobiography*, he tells us that the views that he and Harriet Taylor came to hold "would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists."¹³
- In *Principles of Political Economy* [V, xi, 13], Mill concludes his discussion of government assistance to the poor by saying that (subject to some limitations) "I conceive it to be highly desirable that the certainty of subsistence should be held out by law to the destitute able-bodied, rather than that their relief should depend on voluntary charity."
- In *Principles of Political Economy* [V, ii, 13], he rather brusquely rejects the view that "governments ought to confine themselves to affording protection against force and fraud," lists a host of diverse activities that governments may legitimately engage in, and concludes with the sweeping utilitarian comment, "There is a multitude of cases in which governments, with general approbation, assume powers and execute functions

¹³ *Autobiography*, 196. On Mill and socialism, see also Pedro Schwartz, *The New Political Economy of J. S. Mill* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1972), ch. 7; and Lionel Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy in English Classical Political Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1952), Lecture V.