John Stuart Mill’s Location in Contemporary Debate:

A Case for Its Reassessment.

In the end, political theory can make no contribution to how we govern ourselves except by struggling, against all the impulses that drag us back to our own culture, toward generality and some reflective basis for deciding which of our traditional distinctions and discriminations are genuine and which spurious, which contribute to the flourishing of the ideals we want, after reflection, to commit.


A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

by Raymond Bale, BA(Hon) (UNE)

December 1996.
I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all other sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Raymond Bale
Abstract.


Contemporary theorists regard Mill as historically significant only and without impact on the two main strands of contemporary debate, which concern the possibility of the development of universal theory in a context of moral pluralism, and the attack upon liberal theory by the cluster of arguments collectively referred to as ‘communitarian’. The argument of the thesis is that this regard should be revised. Its interpretation of Mill’s political philosophy is intended to demonstrate the fruitfulness of a re-examination of his thought in relation to the contemporary debate. It does so by way of analysis of the broad rather than the narrow spectrum of ideas which comprise his materialist philosophy, arguing that only by accepting Mill’s claim for his thought to be both holist and naturalist can the full extent of its value be recognized. Via this method of interpretation, the thesis reaches the conclusion that Mill’s universal virtue ethics recognized and incorporated moral pluralism, and did so in a way that produced a set of necessary conditions that each code of action must satisfy to retain legitimacy as a moral code. To the extent that these conditions are satisfied, the plurality of codes of action are both reconcilable and commensurable. Furthermore, Mill’s understanding of the autonomous individual at the level of human nature has as a crucial factor the existence of a hard-wired disposition in agents to perform other-directed actions. The cultivation and development of this disposition is essential for the achievement of the greatest possible individual happiness. Individuality is achieved only by the participation of agents in groups and society. The conclusion of the thesis is that considerable evidence is found in Mill’s work to confirm the claim that its re-examination from this perspective will contribute fruitfully to the debate on both major issues in political philosophy, and accordingly his position in the debate should be revised.
Acknowledgements.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the support of my supervisor, Mr. George Westbrook, throughout the duration of my candidature. In addition, I wish to recognize the significance for the development of the thesis argument of conversations I have had over the past few years with members of the Politics Department in the University of New England, together with comment and criticism from others in the wider academic community. In particular, I want to mention Dr. Tony Lynch, Dr. John Garner, Mr. David Kent, Professor John Skorupski, Professor C. L. Ten, Professor Fred D’Agostino, Dr. Pam Stavropoulos, and Mr. Jeff Archer, to each of whom I am indebted in a variety of ways. To the many others who have contributed, advertently or otherwise, to the emergence of the thesis in its present form I wish also to extend my gratitude.

Every candidate is aware of the enormous burden placed upon those close to them during the production of a completed thesis. It is a burden of many dimensions, and I am proud to acknowledge the unflagging love and support of my partner, Kim Lawes, as being the single most significant factor in enabling me to enjoy the years of my candidature.

With regard to the content of the thesis, I thank all those mentioned here for their help and guidance during its production, whilst retaining for myself sole responsibility for such flaws as remain.

-00o-
Contents

Chapter I. John Stuart Mill and the Contemporary Debate in Political Theory ................................................................. 1
§I.i. Mill’s place in the contemporary debate in political philosophy between the liberals and the communitarians.
§I.ii The relocation of Mill in the contemporary debate.
§I.iii. The framework of criticisms and conditions the thesis interpretation of Mill is required to satisfy.
§I.iv. The context and content of contemporary theoretical debate. Mill’s possible response to the variety of extant theoretical positions.
§I.v. Mill’s methodology and the methodology of the thesis.
§I.vi. The pattern of presentation of the thesis argument.

Part One. Mill’s Account of Human Nature and His Discovery of Its Telos ............................................................................ 30
Part One. Introductory Remarks.

Chapter II. The Wellsprings of Action: Mill’s Indicative Account of Human Nature, Motivation, and Actions ........................................ 34
§II.i. Mill’s starting point in the development of political theory.
§II.ii. Mill’s understanding of the distinction and interrelation of sensation and perception.
§II.iii. ‘The sovereign masters, ‘pain and pleasure’: why important, and how experienced?
§II.iv. How is pleasure sought and pain avoided? The elements of consciousness.
§II.v. The chain of consciousness from sensation to choice of action [I]: sensation, desire, memory, perception, volition.
§II.vi. The chain of consciousness from sensation to choice of action [III]: volition, reason, choice, action.
§II.vii. The origin and significance of habit in Mill’s account of human nature: volitions transformed into habits; habits the foundation of character; volition and occulted desire.
§II.viii. The importance of character in Mill’s theory, and differences in character explained.
§II.ix. The importance of dispositions and capacities in Mill’s account of human nature: the relation between these and pleasure/pain.
§II.x. The importance of dispositions and capacities in Mill’s account of human nature: the relation between these and pleasure/pain.
§II.xi. The ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ aspects of human nature, and their characteristic pleasures.
§II.xii. How do agents discover complex pleasure? Why do agents prefer complex pleasure? Why do agents sometimes turn away from amendment of their nature?

Chapter III. Mill’s Understanding of the Concept of “Happiness” ................................................................. 64
§III.i. The elusive nature of the concept of ‘happiness’
§III.ii. Mill’s qualifications for the concept of happiness lays open its complexity.
§III.iii. Illustration of the qualifications in action. The qualifications expressed in the connection between ‘happiness’ and ‘just ce’. Mill’s analysis of the component parts of ‘happiness’.
§III.iv. The importance of reason in Mill’s account of happiness.
§III.v. The interaction of reason and feeling in the quest for happiness occurs in, and is linked to, context.
§III.vi. The location of happiness in the context of individual circumstances, time and space.
§III.vii. The tripartite nature of happiness recapitulated.
§III.viii. Reinforcement of the claim for Mill’s tripartite understanding of ‘happiness’ The types of happiness depicted by Mill.
§III.ix. The problem inherent in this depiction of happiness.

Chapter IV. The Telos of Existence: Mill’s Formulation of the ‘Philosophia Prima peculiar to Art’. [I] ............................................................... 92
§IV.i. Mill’s understanding of the relation between the Doctrine of Ends and the Method of Science.
§IV.ii. The discovery of the end and purpose of human existence from the evidence of science, together with the formulation of a theory of action whereby human beings move toward that end.
§IV.iii. The discovery by the method of science of the telos of human existence.
§IV.iv. The evidence for Mill’s acceptance of survival and melioration as the telos of existence deduced by the method of science.
§IV.v. What is Mill’s understanding of the first principle of action according to the method of science?
§IV.vi. Conclusion of method of science.

Part Two. Mill’s Broad Ethical Doctrine and Its Ground ....................... 111
Part Two. Introductory Remarks.

Chapter V. The Telos of Existence: Mill’s Formulation of the
‘Philosophia Prima peculiar to Art’. [II] ...................................................... 116
§V.i. Justification of the shift from the conclusions of Mill’s method of science to the normative principles of his Art, or Theory of Life.
§V.ii. Mill’s translation of the indicative conclusions of the method of science into the imperatives of the Art of Life. The acceptance by the Art of Life of the pursuit of happiness as the naturalistic ground of pre-emptive theory.
§V.iii. The imperatives to act in Mill’s Art or Theory of Life.
§V.iv. Virtue.
§V.v. Mill’s Art or Theory of Life Recapitulated.
§V.vi. Mill’s unproven first principle defined: the rationale for the ‘greatest possible’ happiness as the telos of the Art of Life. The ‘larger proof’ of the principle of utility.
§V.vii. The introduction of the concept of perfectibility in Mill’s holistic theory.
§V.viii. Mill’s meliorist perspective of ‘larger’ proof.

Chapter VI. Mill’s Broad Ethical Doctrine: Secondary
Principles of Action and A Theory of Value ........................................ 137
§VI.i. Mill’s recognition of the requirement of a subset of principles for the achievement of happiness.
§VI.ii. Mill’s secondary principles of action.
§VI.iii. Secondary principles of action and Mill’s account of human nature.
§VI.iv. Mill’s general theory of value.
§VI.v. Mill’s criterion of goodness.
§VI.vi. Types of goodness in Mill’s general theory of value.
§VI.vii. Mill’s locus of value examined.
§VI.viii. The ground of moral duty located in Mill’s account of human nature: its original condition, its function, and its transition into an objective moral code.
§VI.ix. Mill’s requirement of a theory of self-realization and a theory of conduct.
Chapter VII. Mill’s Theory of Self-Realization in a Context of Variables, and His Theory of Conduct. Commendation and Command, Virtue and Duty Examined

§VII.i. Mill’s theory of self-realization: unpacking the telos of existence.
§VII.ii. Mill’s recognition of intervening variables and their effect on his theory of self-realization: the subtlety of Mill’s theory of value increased.
§VII.iii. The effect of the introduction of commendation on the development of Mill’s general theory of value.
§VII.iv. Mill’s theory and doctrine of conduct.
§VII.v. The status of reason in Mill’s theory of conduct.
§VII.vi. What is the relation between duty and virtue in Mill’s injunction to amend nature in order to achieve the telos of existence? What is the function of duty?
§VII.vii. The nature of prescription in Mill’s theory and doctrine of conduct: types of duty and their spheres of operation.
§VII.viii. The link between the indicative account of telos and Mill’s prescriptive theory.

Part Three. Mill’s Translation of Theory into Praxis: the culmination of his holistic philosophy and its potential for engagement with contemporary debate

Part Three: Introductory remarks.

Chapter VIII. Mill’s Understanding of Customary Morality and Its Identity with Moral Pluralism [I]: Mill’s Understanding of Perfectibility and Progress as Criteria of Measurement of Attainment of Telos: His Recognition of the Nature of Moral Pluralism and Its Relation to His Universal Virtue Theory

§VIII.i. The potential of Mill’s thought for engagement with the problems of contemporary political theory.
§VIII.ii. Mill’s requirement for criteria of measurement.
§VIII.iii. Mill’s understanding of the concept of perfectibility.
§VIII.iv. Mill’s understanding of ‘perfection’, and a comparison between it and his understanding and use of ‘improvement’—the reaffirmation of the importance of harmony and balance.
§VIII.v. Summary of Mill’s understanding of the concept of perfectibility as it applies to individual agents.
§VIII.vi. Mill’s understanding of the concept of progress as it applies to the community.
§VIII.vii. Mill’s understanding of progress as improvement, as a state or condition of the community.
§VIII.viii. Mill’s philosophy of history as illustration of his understanding of community progress: the significance of circumstances and environment for the achievement of possible progress: the inevitable emergence of moral pluralism and the way dominant moralities change over time.
§VIII.ix. The significance of harmony and balance to Mill’s understanding of perfection in the individual and progress in the community.
§VIII.x. Modification to the theory of self-realization brought about by the importance of harmony and balance to the achievement of individual happiness.
§VIII.xi. The necessary conditions implicit in Mill’s naturalist theory for ethical and moral codes to satisfy in order to be compatible and commensurable both with Mill’s enlarged utilitarianism and with one another.
§VIII.xii. The relation between the concepts of perfectibility and progress and the faculty of reason. Mill’s location of the potential weakness in social and political theory.

His Ambivalence explained

§IX.i. The pattern of Mill's analysis: reason and the formulation of codes of action.
§IX.ii. Reason and the concepts of perfection and progress. Reason as the instrument with which to achieve harmony and balance.
§IX.iii. Reason and the significance of circumstances and environment to its cultivation and development.
§IX.iv. Mill's development of reason as the means whereby human beings may influence positively the progress of their community existence, and his belief in the conjunction of both individual and community ends via the exercise of that faculty.
§IX.v. The effect of this understanding of the role of reason in the development of codes of action upon Mill's formulation of holistic, naturalist theory.
§IX.vi. Customary morality and its relation to Mill's understanding of improvement, perfectibility, and progress.
§IX.vii. The relation of customary morality to the processes of consciousness and the development of habit.
§IX.viii. The development of customary morality.
§IX.ix. Mill's ambivalence toward customary morality, and its significance to his broad ethical doctrine.
§IX.x. Context and customary morality.
§IX.xi. Mill's understanding of right actions and good outcomes, and their relation to customary morality, and moral pluralism.
§IX.xii. The role of customary morality in Mill's holistic theory.
§IX.xiii. Summary of the significance of customary morality for Mill's development of social and political theory.

Chapter X. Confirmation of the validity of the thesis interpretation of Mill's thought, and a summary of its impact on Mill's location in contemporary debate

§X.i. The purpose of the chapter.
§X.ii. Liberty is a means which requires an end. Mill's theory of individuality, and its place in his naturalist framework. Individuality as the end for which liberty is necessary.
§X.iii. The realization of individuality in a multiplicity of contexts.
§X.iv. Mill's understanding of the relation between individuality and liberty.
§X.v. Mill's account of liberty.
§X.vi. Mill's auxiliary theories of authority and education.
§X.vii. Mill's program of action as a means to achieve individuality.
§X.viii. Parsimony and modesty as features of Mill's holist, naturalist theory.
§X.ix. The engagement of Mill's holist, naturalist theory with the central concerns of contemporary debate in political theory.
§X.x. Mill's universal virtue theory and its potential to engage the problem of moral pluralism.
§X.xi. Mill's awareness of the significance of contexts on the implementation of the enlarged principle of utility.
§X.xii. Mill's recognition of the necessity of participation in communal activities and its potential to engage the tension between liberal and communitarian positions.
§X.xiii. Mill's derivation of socio-political theory, with which to achieve incremental change, from his ultimate principle of action.
§X.xiv. Conclusion: the impact of Mill's thought on contemporary debate and affirmation of the fruitfulness of relocating him in that debate.