

Notes on J.S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*

1. Women's Equality

- a. Though *The Subjection of Women* wasn't published until 1869, most of it was probably written by 1858. We're fairly sure of this because we're fairly sure that Mill composed much of the work in concert with his beloved wife Harriet Taylor. He saw her as his intellectual equal, yet the prevailing social conditions were not conducive to recognizing her genius or permitting the dissemination of her egalitarian views. Later in life, Mill seems to have wanted to rectify that situation. His position on equality for women was radical, given the mores dominant in his era, and he even argued in parliament for women's suffrage. (That wouldn't be granted nationally in the U.K. until 1928—and in the U.S. until 1920.) The text we have here can then afford us a view into Mill's commitment to liberty played out in the realm of sexual politics.
- b. Mill lays his cards on the table from page one. Immediately, he condemns gender inequality in the strongest possible terms. Utter equality is the only way forward for all humankind. It is firmly held opinion "that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." (471)
- c. Even though the onus should be on the opponents of sexual equality to give their reasons for denying it, Mill acknowledges that the practice of inequality holds the historical precedent. Most of human societies throughout history—especially European history—have codified woman's subjection to man. But Mill hastens to point out that historical precedents and customs are not the same as natural or scientific reasons. By submitting to the "idolatry" of our own prejudices, we tend to claim that our culturally specific and accidental biases are somehow encoded in nature. But this has in no way been proven: "For the apotheosis of Reason we have substituted that of Instinct; and we call everything instinct which we find in ourselves and for which we cannot trace any rational foundation." (474) If we want to do justice to the question of equality, we'll have to try to reason back before these contingent prejudices.
- d. In fact, the historical hierarchy of the sexes is founded on little other than brute force. Mill writes: "the inequality of rights between men and women has no other source than the law of the strongest." (476) Yet modern society thinks it has been abandoned force as its organizing principle in favor of reason. In this it is deceived. The 'rational basis' for sexual inequality is nothing other than force disguised as freethinking.
  - i. Here with Mill we find elements that anticipate Nietzsche. There's not just the quasi-historical narrative of force and its transmutation into law and reason, but also the call for us to think our way back beyond our supposedly rational biases about what's 'natural' or 'good.' There's even a hint that Christianity bears part of the blame for this preservation of force as reason—like a wolf in sheep's clothing. Christianity should have put an end of the law of force right away, but it could not. Only the diffusion of force in modern bourgeois society might be capable of that...

- e. In opposition to Tocqueville's portrait of American women rationally and freely choosing to submit to the marriage-yoke, Mill finds the yoking to an act of violent domination. Of the sexual hierarchy, he writes: "If ever any system of privilege and enforced subjection had its yoke tightly riveted on the necks of those who are kept down by it, this has." (482)
  - f. Reflect next on this question: "But was there every any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?" (482) We tend to confuse the "usual" for the "natural." (484) But that blinds us to both reason and nature. It blinds us to the way that women have been socially groomed from a young age to submissive rather than willful. They've been told to obsess over affections and attracting men. After a long enough stretch of time, all of these socially embedded traits come to be seen as natural. (486-487)
2. Women's Liberty
- a. Turning from his negative attacks on the idea of inequality as natural, Mill next tries to make a positive case for women's emancipation. We've already dealt with much of his underlying sense of why freedom works in *On Liberty*, and here he brings those commitments to bear upon the case of women.
  - b. Custom, then, cannot serve as a sure foundation for inequality. Progress, meanwhile, demands we overturn inequality. This is because of what Mill takes to be the hard-won effectiveness of rationally free individualism in European history: "The modern conviction, the fruit of a thousand years of experience, is, that things in which the individual is the person directly interested, never go right but as they are left to his own discretion; and that any regulation of them by authority, except to protect the rights of others, is sure to be mischievous." (489) And: "It is not that all processes are supposed to be equally good, or all persons to be equally qualified for everything; but that freedom of individual choice is now known to be the only thing which procures the adoption of the best processes, and throws each operation into the hands of those who are best qualified for it." (489)
  - c. From this he draws a consequence: "But if the principle is true, we ought to act as if we believed it, and not to ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy, any more than to be born black instead of white, or a commoner instead of a nobleman—shall interdict people from all the more elevated social positions, and from all, except a few, reasonable occupations." (490) Society as a whole loses out when liberty is constricted, since it loses out on those free men and women who would be able to benefit the whole if only given the chance.
  - d. After making that point, Mill again returns to his attack on the very idea of woman's nature. Because women has always been subjugated throughout history, taught to act one way instead of another, we simply do not know what they are capable of achieving. Only by granting liberty to women can we free them to experiment and develop in any number of ways. Only then will we know what possibilities lie in women's nature: "What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others." (493)
  - e. A study of history should lead us to argue for women's equality, since it should show us the historically contingent character of women's social position today. But instead we see only the pseudo-natural features we want to see: "History, which is now so much better understood than formerly, teaches another lesson: if only by showing the extraordinary susceptibility of human nature to external influences, and the

extreme variableness of those of its manifestations which are supposed to be most universal and uniform. But in history, as in travelling, men usually see only what they already had in their own minds; and few learn much from history, who do not bring much with them to its study.” (494)

- f. Of course, here Mill is merely scratching the surface of a bigger problem: how do social circumstances condition human character? He’s not quite prepared to delve into the deepest corners of that question here, but he does want to remind us to restrain ourselves from unfounded generalizations about what women are like. Knowing one woman is not the same as knowing every woman. And knowing what was and is need not tell us what might be. (496-497)
  - g. As in *On Liberty*, so here Mill reminds us that the point of liberty is not to drag down the mighty but to elevate the oppressed. In this case, it’s not about destroying man’s livelihood. The goal is instead to remove the unfair advantages man enjoys over woman, so that free development—and even competition—could take place. (498-499)
  - h. Finally, Mill ends Part I of his essay by claiming that liberated women would in no way undermine the best parts of traditional morality. Emancipated women would freely and rationally choose marriage and procreation—provided that marriage was no longer a form of despotism! (501) Here think back to Wollstonecraft and Tocqueville, both of whom argued that granting rational liberty to women would lead to become only more virtuous—even if they differed on what precisely that virtue might consist in. (Tocqueville has women choosing outright submission, while Wollstonecraft wouldn’t go quite that far. Nor would Mill, perhaps.)
3. Marriage
- a. After laying out the core of his argument for women’s liberation, Mill next turns to analyzing particular branches of the issue. The first of these is the “marriage contract.” (502) Here he is primarily concerned that traditional forms of matrimony amount to little more than slavery by another name. The wife’s property, for example, usually flows directly over to the husband. And seldom do women (in Mill’s time) even get the chance to choose their own husbands. But if they must be slaves, can’t they at least be given the chance to choose their own masters? (Here Mill skirts around the controversial question of divorce—he wants to take a stand against arranged marriages, certainly, but he’s not sure he’s ready to apply liberty in the fullest possible sense to the realm of remarriage...) (503-505)
  - b. The quality of marriages, moreover, is entirely too dependent on the disposition of individual husbands. A tyrant rules the home tyrannically, while even a peaceable man conjures up in his wife a perverse sort of affection, since her love for him in part rests on the fact that he could destroy her but chooses not to. (507-508)
  - c. The interests of the whole family tend to be subsumed under those of the husband: “the care for the wife and children being care for them as parts of the man’s own interests and belongings, and their individual happiness being immolated in every shape to his smallest preferences.” (510)
  - d. Yet marriage need not be this way: “It is not true that in all voluntary association between two people, one of them must be absolute master: still less that the law must determine which of them it shall be.” (512) Perhaps modern society can encourage a cooperative model for marriage, not unlike that of a successful business partnership.

- e. Even though a taste for equality might be becoming more prominent in modern society, Mill admits that institutions like marriage continue to operate in terms of pre-modern tastes and mores. Neither philosophy nor religion have yet been able to overcome self-interest and self-worship in the name of utter equality. But a sea change in morality might be coming. (516-517)
  - f. In this new moral universe, the best of classical and Christian mores will be allowed to develop toward full emancipation. ('Northern' barbarism will no longer be able to hold them back! Political eschatology yields to no brute.) As Mill writes: "We are entering into an order of things in which justice will again be the primary virtue; grounded as before on equal, but now also on sympathetic association; having its roots no longer in the instinct of equals for self-protection, but in a cultivated sympathy between them; and no one being now left out, but an equal measure being extended to all. It is no novelty that mankind do not distinctly foresee their own changes, and that their sentiments are adapted to past, not to coming ages. To see the futurity of the species has always been the privilege of the intellectual elite, or of those who have learnt from them; to have the feelings of that futurity has been the distinction, and usually the martyrdom, of a still rarer elite. Institutions, books, education, society all go on training human beings for the old, long after the new has come; much more when it is only coming. But the true virtue of human beings is fitness to live together as equals..." (518)
    - i. This call for a new era of egalitarian justice might stir us, but we shouldn't forget that there's always an 'outside' group that's being set in opposition to modern society's values. Here, for Mill, caricatures of Islam and Hinduism serve that purpose. Christianity is for him the "religion of the progressive portion of mankind," while "Islamism" and "Brahminism" lock other human societies into dead institutions resistant to change. (521) Recall here Wollstonecraft's argument for woman's liberty against the "Mahometans"...
  - g. In this new era of sympathetic justice and equality, it still might not be common for women to work outside the home. Mill's imagination can only go so far. He ends this section by instead praising the task of household management—*oikonomia*, if you remember your Aristotle. Yet exceptions would of course be made for exceptional women who aimed to contribute outside the household. What matters is that women must always have the power to work—perhaps even the right to work—even if doing so might not actually be appropriate in a given situation. (522-523)
4. Women's Capabilities
- a. Having discussed domestic equality for women, Mill now turns his focus to women's capacities to contribute to society beyond the home. This he calls "their admissibility to all the functions and occupations hitherto retained as the monopoly of the stronger sex..." (524) Again, since we have no natural basis for keeping women away from these tasks, they should be free to pursue them. Only then can a rational appraisal of their performance be attempted. (This might also take place under the rubric of 'competition'—let the market decide what women can do!)
  - b. This democratization of tasks extends beyond the realm of employment and into that of political participation. Here Mill stakes on his boldest claims: in a truly free and equal society, women must be given the vote. He writes: "Under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are admitted to the suffrage, there is not a shadow of justification for not admitting women under the same. The majority of the women of any class are not likely to differ in political opinion from the majority

of the men of the same class, unless the question be one in which the interests of women, as such, are in some way involved; and if they are so, women require the suffrage, as their guarantee of just and equal consideration.” (527)

- i. Mill leaves the door open for something like ‘class solidarity,’ although he doesn’t offer up quite as robust a notion of class politics as Marx will.
  - c. Mill’s position on what women are capable of is certainly radical for his time, but certain limits do remain in place. After all of his attacks on unjustified generalizations about women’s nature, in this chapter he does begin to offer up some generalizations of his own. For example: “But, looking at women as they are known in experience, it may be said of them, with more truth than belongs to most other generalizations on the subject, that the general bent of their talents is toward the practical.” (532)
    - i. But why stop there? Why limit women to practical rather than theoretical aptitude? We can see the fruits of these prejudices still today, in preconceptions people have about the suitability of the sexes for math and science and so on...
  - d. Mill elaborates on his newfound propensity for generalization. Women tend to be associated with reality, objectivity, specificity, and rapidity of thought. Men, meanwhile, are linked to abstraction, speculation, breadth, and patient consideration. (534) So what is Mill doing here? Has he simply swapped out one mode of stereotyping for another? Can his ‘empirical’ observations be defended in a way the ‘natural’ claims of his opponents cannot?
  - e. By drawing on a series of awkward ethnic parallels, Mill argues that women in general remain capable of general improvement, given the right forms of education and cultivation. Even if most Irishmen are superstitious Catholics (so says Mill), you’ll still find one or two capable of rational civilization. But if the whole lot were taken up and assimilated into the right kind of progressive educational framework, then no natural inhibitions would hold them back. The same goes for women. It’s not a question of nature, but of culture. (538-544)
  - f. If women are indeed possessed of a special sort of intellectual spontaneity, then the only way this spontaneity will flourish into productive originality is if they’re given a formative environment in which to nurture it. (547) But that doesn’t seem to be happening.
  - g. So it remains a question of social context, not inherent nature: “Whoever is in the least capable of estimating the influence on the mind of the entire domestic and social position and the whole habit of a life, must easily recognize in that influence a complete explanation of nearly all the apparent differences between women and men, including the whole of those which imply any inferiority. As for moral differences, considered as distinguished from intellectual, the distinction commonly drawn is the advantage of women.” (554)
  - h. Women’s emancipation is imperative, but it cannot be realized unless men want it to. Intellectual and moral stereotypes restrain women from pursuing their freedom. This situation can only be overcome if men stop using those stereotypes to justify their unjustifiable oppression of women: “Women cannot be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women, until men in considerable number are prepared to join with them in the undertaking.” (556)
5. Women’s Emancipation for the Benefit of All Humankind

- a. The final section of Mill's essay poses the following question: "Would mankind be at all better off if women were free?" (557) He wants to make the case not only that women would be better off, but that all humanity would prosper. To answer this question, he wants us to make use of his modified utilitarian framework, which emphasizes the desirability of generalized pleasure or happiness for the greatest number. It's still all about utility.
- b. The first advantage to society would be to render just an institution that so far sounds a lot like slavery: marriage. This institution weakens the character of both men and women, as Mill has already argued. Society would benefit from building itself around a more enlightened institution. (558-559)
- c. This would be such an advantage because the whole thrust of political history is to replace the law of force with that of justice—to turn respect into a reward for meritorious conduct rather than a birthright. For Mill, this is true justice—and, in a sense, true Christianity—and it's impossible unless the law of force is uprooted, starting in the home: "All that education and civilization are doing to efface the influences on character of the law of force, and replace them by those of justice, remains merely on the surface, as long as the citadel of the enemy is not attacked. The principle of the modern movement in morals and politics is that conduct and conduct alone entitles to respect: that not what men are, but what they do, constitutes their claim to deference; that, above all, merit and not birth is the only rightful claim to power and authority." (560)
- d. An added benefit would be that society could tap into reserves of mental energy that it currently ignores. We'd have double the brains working 'round the clock to improve things! Women already have moral influence on society, so why not let it be the most educated form of influence possible? Why not let women take hold of their lives as full human beings? Mill writes that "the mere consciousness a woman would have of being a human being like any other, entitled to choose her pursuits... would effect an immense expansion of the faculties of women..." (562)
- e. Chivalry and charity are both insufficient; only emancipation will suffice. In a society dominated by chivalry, there may be moral sympathy but there won't be equality. Morality will consist in the tyrant's refraining from tyrannizing. But the point is to end the power to tyrannize completely. And the truest charity is not working and thinking on behalf of others—on behalf of women, in this case—but instead letting others work and think alongside you. (564-568)
- f. But the greatest advantage for society lies in this: that emancipation will grant more rationality, freedom, and even happiness to women themselves. Mill writes: "But it would be a grievous understatement of the case to omit the most direct benefit of all, the unspeakable gain in private happiness to the liberated half of the species; the difference to them between a life of subjection to the will of others, and a life of rational freedom. After the primary necessities of food and raiment, freedom is the first and strongest want of human nature. While mankind are lawless, their desire for lawless freedom. When they have learned to understand the meaning of duty and the value of reason, they incline more and more to be guided and restrained by these in the exercise of their freedom; but they do not therefore desire freedom less; they do not become disposed to accept the will of other people as the representative and interpreter of those guiding principles. On the contrary, the communities in which the reason has been most cultivated, and in which the idea of social duty has been most powerful, are those which have most strongly asserted the freedom of action of

the individual—the liberty of each to govern his conduct by his own feelings of duty, and by such laws and social restraints as his own conscience can subscribe to.” (576)

- g. Happiness, in turn, depends on the freedom to pursue enjoyment and fulfilment in one’s occupation. This is precisely what’s denied to women: “what we are now discussing is not the need which society has of the services of women in public business, but the dull and hopeless life to which it so often condemns them, by forbidding them to exercise the practical abilities which many of them are conscious of, in any wider field than one which to some of them never was, and to others is no longer, open. If there is anything vitally important to the happiness of human beings, it is that they should relish their habitual pursuit. This requisite of an enjoyable life is very imperfectly granted, or altogether denied, to a large part of mankind...” (580)
- h. In the end, then, emancipation is a question not just of social progress and development, but of happiness and human flourishing. Nature and happenstance restrain human action to a sufficient degree that the hope of many for happiness fall short. Our petty restrictions on others’ liberty cruelly add to this difficulty of attaining happiness. What’s worse is that we have no good reason for doing so, especially in the case of women.