

Notes for a Discussion of J.S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*

Session I

General Topic of Discussion: John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, I-II

Outline of Discussion

1. Hard-Wired Human Nature vs Historical Conditioning
2. Equality and Intimacy Go Together
3. Legal Mandates about Women's 'Nature'
4. Free Competition for Women (and its Blind Spots)
5. Mediating between Force and Legitimacy

Flow of Discussion

- We started class off by contextualizing *The Subjection of Women* as a text motivated by a historical perspective on how social forces influence humanity's apparent 'nature.' What we take to be natural differences can often turn out to be not so much hard-wired as culturally constituted over time. Here, Mill is giving us the tools to apply this line of thinking to society's treatment of gender.
- V. then pointed us to passages from p. 517 and p. 497: "Though the truth may not be felt or generally acknowledged for generations to come, the only school of genuine moral sentiment is society between equals." (and) "The truth is that the position of looking up to another is extremely unpropitious to complete sincerity and openness with him. The fear of losing ground in his opinion or in his feelings is so strong that even in an upright character, there is an unconscious tendency to show only the best side, or the side which, though not the best, is that which he most likes to see: and it may be confidently said that thorough knowledge of one another hardly ever exists, but between persons who, besides being intimates, are equals."
- For Mill, then, moral intimacy and knowledge of others are only possible if people treat each other as something like equals. But, we asked, is such equality easy to preserve while also maximizing liberty and eccentricity? *The Subjection of Women* seems to emphasize sameness and uniformity, whereas *On Liberty* focused on difference and originality. Is this a real conflict between the two works, or merely a shift in emphasis?
- Many of Mill's opponents, for their part, argued that society has to mandate that women do what it's natural for them to do. On p. 499 and elsewhere, Mill debunks this position by pointing out that there is no need for society to mandate women to do what they would do by nature. Instead, women should be given the freedom to do what seems natural to them, and then we'll see what actually results. Until we attempt this kind of social experimentation, we'll never be able to distinguish what people do 'according to nature' from what they do as a result of social forces.

- Mill puts forward a kind of free competition, in which women would be able to compete to perform whichever tasks they liked best. This plan sounded good first, but we then questioned it further, asking whether or not such an ideally fair competition could ever take place. Wouldn't social mores still affect the fates of men and women, even if both were legally free? What would the criterion for selection within that competition actually be? And who or what might still be left out of such competition?
- Here we come up against a recurring issue in utilitarian ethics. If our goal is to maximize general utility, then perhaps there will indeed be some particular people who lose out along the way, all for the greater good. Even still, we could take steps to ensure that those competitive losses were evenly distributed across gender lines.
- We then related these issues back to our original problem of equality and knowing one another. If true equality and intimacy takes place on the small scale of friends and family, then how are we to extend these egalitarian values to the broader sphere of free competition? Again we see a potential tension emerge between the constraints of justice and the dynamism of liberty.
- In general, though, Mill's goal in this work is to give us a way of mediating between force and legitimacy. He's giving us a modern reply to Thrasymachus. He sees the general progression of reform as inevitable, but also exhorts us to make that progress explicit and even cultivate it. Perhaps we can see elements of such progress in our own society, though at the same time we had to ask: how far do legal reforms go in engendering actual equality? Are there still other issues, such as wage inequality, that prove difficult to correct through mere legislation? Even if aspects of legal equality are put in place, there can still be social-hierarchical forces that keep inequality alive and well. Society, in Mill's sense, is still a work in progress.

Session II

General Topic of Discussion: John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, III-IV

Outline of Discussion

6. Changing Historical Strategies for Excluding Women
7. Bringing Women into the Sphere of Social Experimentation
8. Persistent Hindrances to Women's Liberation
9. Intellectual and Moral Distinctions Enforced between Men and Women
10. Mill's Critical Perspective on Equality and Liberty

Flow of Discussion

- Z. got us started with a passage from pp. 524-525: "In the last two centuries, when (which was seldom the case) any reason beyond the mere existence of the fact was thought to be required to justify the disabilities of women, people seldom assigned as a reason their inferior mental capacity; which, in times when there was a real trial of personal faculties (from which all women were not excluded) in the struggles of public life, no one really believed in. The reason given in those days was not women's unfitness, but the interest of society, by which was meant the interest of men: just as the *raison d'état*, meaning the convenience of the government, and the support of existing authority, was deemed a sufficient explanation and excuse for the most flagitious crimes. In the present day, power holds a smoother language, and whomsoever it oppresses, always pretends to do so for their own good: accordingly, when anything is forbidden to women, it is thought necessary to say, and desirable to believe, that they are incapable of doing it, and that they depart from their real path of success and happiness when they aspire to it."
- In other words: men have been keeping women out of certain roles for centuries, but the strategies they use to do so are changing. Perhaps, in the past, sheer force and dominance were able to keep women from sociopolitical engagements, but now a softer rhetoric is performing the same function, claiming that it's for women's own good. The one constant here is that men are not resorting to the strategy of actually asking women what they want to do or feel capable of doing.
- Certain behaviors of ours seem to hold on to inherited understandings of gender roles. Our favorite example here was men holding doors open for women. While the practice may not be offensive in and of itself, it does provide us with an example of how men can have a benign understanding of the way they paternally perform duties for women, rather than letting women see what they can do for themselves. What Mill wants, though, is the constant trial of human faculties, so that we can all strive to reach our maximum potential. If men keep holding women back—even for what appear to be good reasons—then we will never really know what women are capable of. And that result is injurious not just to women, but to all of humanity, since humankind as a whole will be limiting its own potential progress and utility.
- Sometimes, however, men hinder women from occupations that they have in fact proven themselves effective at. The case study here is Queen Victoria, who was largely

considered effective as a ruler, but whose effectiveness did not translate to a broader acceptable of women in leadership roles.

- Instead of expanding women's involvement in such areas, Mill argues that much of society is engineered to keep women out of broader social engagements. The lack of women's suffrage hinders their political involvement. The demands of marriage occupy their time and labor to the exclusion of all else. The poverty of women's education slows their ability to attain the heights of intellectual originality. Overall, there is a kind of social limitation on women's ambition in general.
- In addition to all the intellectual distinctions put in place to separate men from women, Mill adds that there are also moral distinctions. Women are held up as privileged moral actors, and yet this complimentary position actually keeps them from expanding to other modes of life. They risk becoming Tocqueville's transmitters of mores, and no more. Mill concedes that women have had much historical influence on the conduct of even powerful men, but he does not want their domestic or moral influence to be reified into a 'women's nature.'
- In sum, then, Mill thinks that these intellectual and moral limitations on women are detrimental to social progress. But, given the way that historical traditions shape our view of the world (as Mill himself admits), we can still ask: from what vantage point is he able to make such critical claims? His perspective, we noted, was undoubtedly colored by his constructive relationship with his own wife. He also seems to have a sense that there's a general trend in history, which makes it progressively inevitable that current institutions will be overcome in favor of more women's—that is, more human— involvement. In general, he wants there to be a free field of experiment and debate, but one that's driven by a kind of liberty that's not reducible to a violent struggle of force against force. Equality, properly understood, is what should block this devolution of liberty into mere power. But, as we move ahead into Marx and Nietzsche, we might want to keep in mind this question of where Mill's critical vantage point is coming from, and on what grounds he can really guard against the risk that freedom turns into force.